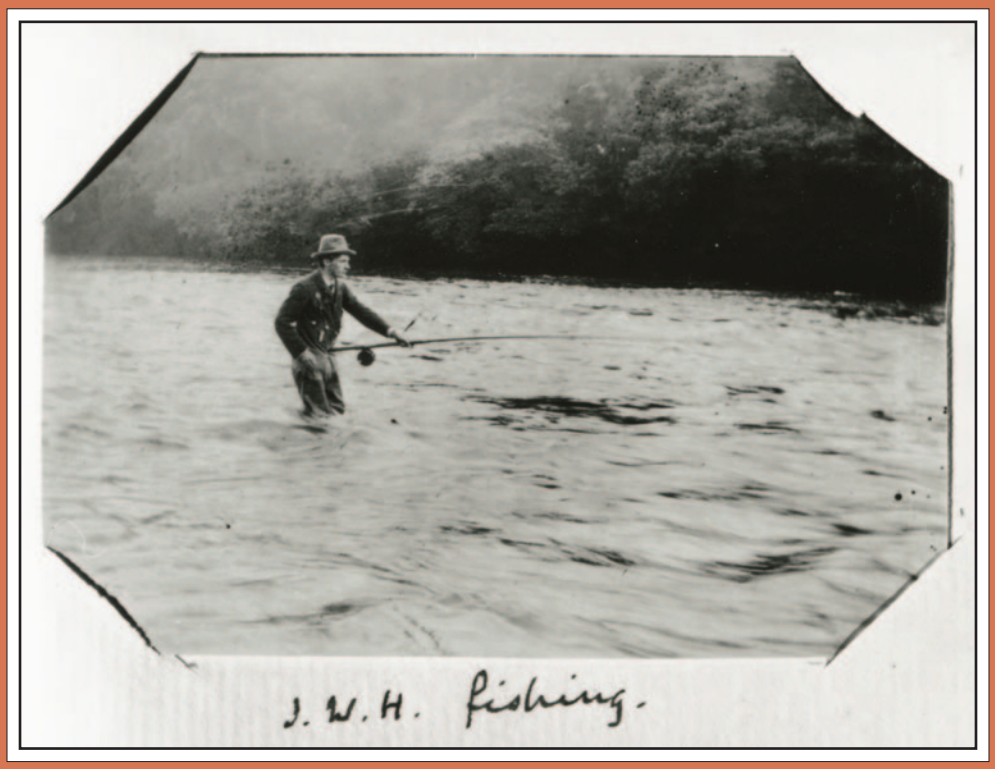
The American Fly Fisher

Journal of the American Museum of Fly Fishing



FALL 2025 VOLUME 51 NUMBER 4

A Century Hence

A detail from Norman Wilkinson's dry-point etching The Leaning Oak, Mottisfont, *which was included in the first and second editions of* A Summer on the Test. *See page 9 for the full illustration.*

Two years ago, Chris Pibus sent me an article proposal: With the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of *A Summer on the Test* (1924) fast upon us, it might be time to celebrate the life and works of John Waller Hills. Further, a more personal portrait of Hills could be presented "based on a range of primary sources from the Bloomsbury Group, arising out of his surprisingly deep connections to Virginia [Stephen] Woolf and her family."

I'm listening.

Back when I read Hermione Lee's 900-plus-page biography of Woolf, around the turn of *this* century, I surely knew of Hills. And yet the fact that he married Stella Duckworth, Woolf's half-sister, did not stick with me.

Pibus notes that Hills, in his preface to the first edition, wonders what readers would think of the book "a century hence." Would his words be relevant? Obsolete? Publishing an article in 2024 might have been a timely reply, but as Pibus dug into his research, it became clear that a more intriguing article could be offered in 2025.

We know quite a bit about Hills's angling life through his own books, and his political and professional life are public record. But to uncover more about his personal life, Pibus researched documents, photographs, and letters, many of which were linked to the Stephen family—including the Duckworth-Hills Papers, acquired by the New York Public Library in 2019.

Pibus pitched, in part, that it was "now possible to bring together the rich biographical material that has surfaced—which has all the elements of Victorian melodrama." His article, while celebrating *Summer* and Hills's other works, offers that melodrama and other delights: a letter from Hills to Duckworth in his own hand and two previously unpublished photos. "Lifting the Veil on John Waller Hills: *A Summer on the Test* Revisited" begins on page 2.

An angling item that has already pushed well past the hundred-years-hence mark is the Wheatley fly box; in fact, it is well into its *next* hundred years. Back with a Keepers of the Flame column (page 18), John Mundt visits Alan Gnann at REC Components in Stafford Springs, Connecticut, where Richard Wheatley of England–branded fly boxes are now produced on original nineteenth-century Wheatley factory fly presses.

Be sure to join Curator Jim Schottenham in the Gallery, where he'll show you an exciting recent addition to our collection: a Granger Registered bamboo fly rod (page 16). Jim occasionally puts together a museum wish list; the latest (page 22) lists reels featured in episode 7 of his Reel Talk webinar, in which he departs from discussing reels we *have* and turns to ones we *want*. With this list in hand, check him out online.

On page 20, Rob Reid reviews a forthcoming book by Jerry Kustich, *Bamboo Days: Memories of an Old Rod Builder*, which will be available from West River Media in November. Reid calls it "equal parts summation, meditation, tribute, and celebration of an artful life."

We celebrated our annual fly-fishing festival in August (page 24), at which we also presented our 2025 Volunteer of the Year Award to Scott Biron (page 27). We mourned in August, too—on page 15, the museum remembers legendary guide, storyteller, and conservationist Flip Pallot. A member of our advisory council, Flip was the subject of the museum's short film *TIME*, which can be viewed on our website.

What will readers think of *A Summer on the Test* in 2124? Will there be a museum dedicated to the history of fly fishing a century hence?

Kathleen Achor
Editor

The American Museum of Fly Fishing is the steward of the history, traditions, and practices of the sport of fly fishing and promotes the conservation of its waters. The museum collects, preserves, exhibits, studies, and interprets the artifacts, art, and literature of the sport and, through a variety of outreach platforms, uses these resources to engage, educate, and benefit all.

We welcome contributions to the *American Fly Fisher*. Before making a submission, please review our Contributor's Guidelines on our website (www.amff.org), or write to request a copy. The museum cannot accept responsibility for statements and interpretations that are wholly the author's.

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ON THE COVER: *Previously unpublished photograph of John Waller Hills salmon fishing in his home waters, the River Eden, on 1 October 1897. Copyright Tate.*

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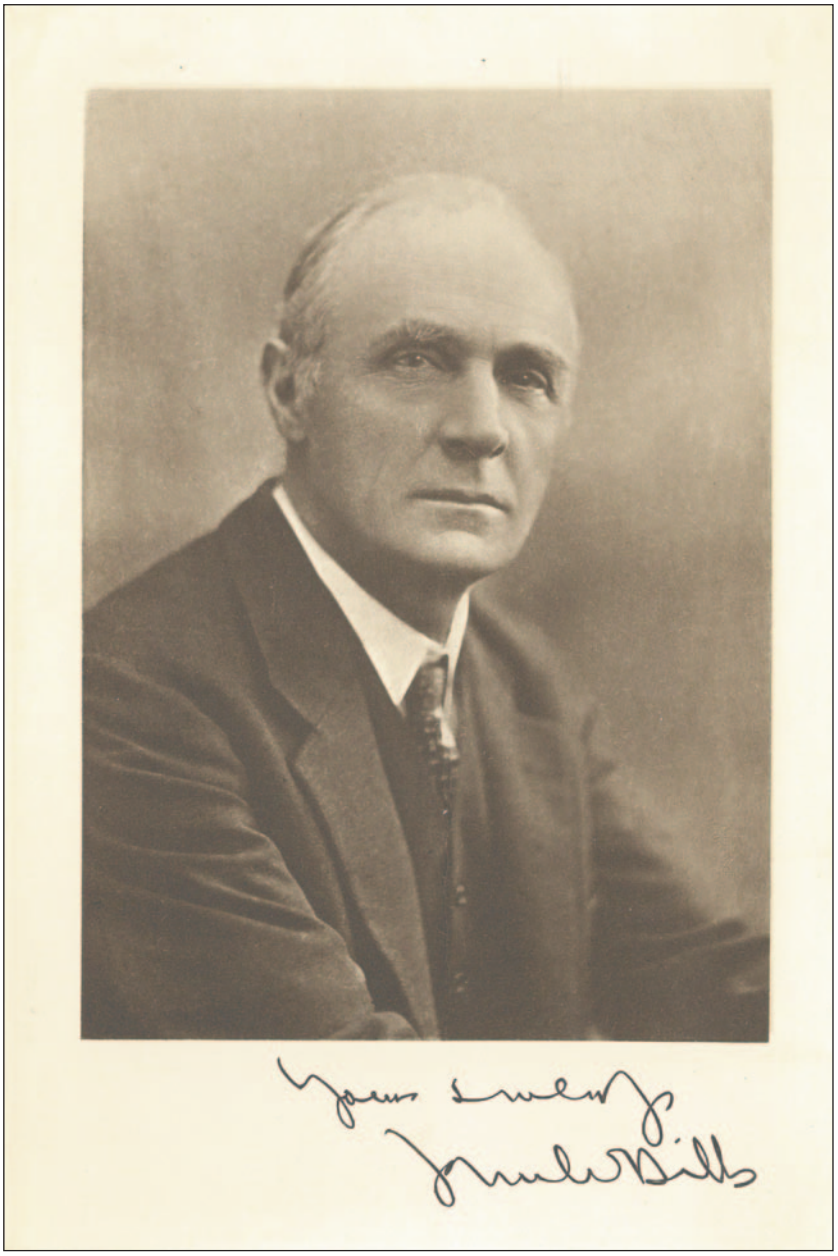
Lifting the Veil on John Waller Hills: *A Summer on the Test* Revisited

by Christopher Pibus

At the age of fifty-four, John Waller Hills (1867–1938) plunged boldly into the world of angling literature by publishing three books over the span of four years, beginning in 1921. The greatest of these was *A Summer on the Test* (1924), which was promoted by the publisher on the dust jacket of a later edition as "the best book on angling since Isaak Walton."[1] To celebrate the centenary, reexamined here are the works and eventful life of Jack Hills, with the benefit of new and overlooked sources that have surfaced in the nearly eighty-seven years since his death. Chief among these are the letters, journals, and reminiscences of the English novelist Virginia Woolf, a family friend—and, briefly, sister-in-law—who wrote in her diary in 1897 about Hills catching a big salmon and was still writing about him in an essay called "Fishing" more than forty years later.

In his preface to the first edition of *A Summer on the Test*, Hills clearly had future readers in mind, pondering whether he would be regarded "a century hence" as an antique figure "obsolete and . . . far away."[2] He was confident only that the Test would be the same, having witnessed over his lifetime the evolution of the trappings and controversies of fly fishing, including the great debates of his day: upstream and downstream methods, flies floating or sunk, and the looming issue of water quality and competing uses.

Readers today can formulate their judgments from the vantage point that Hills imagined in his preface. There remains much that still speaks to us in the musings, triumphs, and misadventures of this Edwardian angler. Hills possessed a uniquely bifocal vision as a fisherman, combining unmatched analytical skills with a poet's lyrical ability to convey the beauty of an angler's surroundings and moments of transcendence at streamside. Seemingly it all came together on one river during one season in 1924: *A Summer on the Test*.



This formal portrait of John Waller Hills in a pose worthy of a member of Parliament, solicitor, and newly published angling author, dates to the 1920s. The photograph—on light card stock—was tipped in as a frontispiece to the author's copy of A History of Fly Fishing for Trout.

Formal portrait of sisters Vanessa Stephen, Stella Duckworth, and Virginia Stephen taken in London, March 1896, the year of Jack and Stella's engagement. The photograph is a fine character study, revealing three strikingly different personalities. Bridgeman Images.

The Eventful Life of Jack Hills

Long before his literary debut, Hills lived a full life, marked in turns by accomplishment and tragic misfortune as a young man in love and later as a London solicitor, parliamentarian, and officer in World War I. Although we know a great deal about his angling, his writings provide no more than a glimpse of his larger life or, God forbid, any personal details. In 1936, he published his angling-related memoirs under the title *My Sporting Life*—an accurate title, for, as Hills explains, "I tell nothing of love, of marriage or of fatherhood, little of the intellectual side of life or of friendship."[3] There are other contemporary sources, however—principally Woolf herself—who provide intimate details about Hills at critical points in his life and who make it possible to reconstruct a fuller portrait than his own reticence would permit.

Born in 1867, Hills was educated at Eton and Oxford and had his apprenticeship as a fly fisherman at Corby Castle near Carlisle, not far from the Scottish border. His father "Buzzy" Hills—a remote figure who served as a judge in the Court of Appeals in occupied Egypt—leased the property and its lovely grounds for thirteen years. By great fortune for Hills, the estate included a 6-mile section of the River Eden, boasting a fine trout and salmon fishery. Although most readers connect Hills strongly with the Test, it was this river and "the sterner watercraft of the North" to which he faithfully returned summer after summer over the course of his life.[4]

At school, Hills befriended George and Gerald Duckworth, and was introduced to their beautiful sister Stella sometime before 1890. Their mother Julia was widowed at an early age and was remarried to Leslie Stephen, the eminent Victorian essayist and biographer. Four more children followed, including Virginia and Vanessa Stephen (eventually known by their married names, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell), both of whom became famous as core members of the Bloomsbury Group.[5] Hills was eventually accepted into this blended Duckworth-Stephen family, particularly by Julia and her daughters, who introduced him to "the women's side of life."[6] He began a determined courtship of the soft-spoken Stella that continued for nearly nine years, overcoming two refusals as well as hostility from her stepfather. After Julia died in 1895, Leslie Stephen became aggressively possessive of Stella, who bore a strong resemblance to her mother, and who was initially unable to resist taking over the role of caregiver to her "increasingly tyrannical" stepfather.[7]

Life with the Duckworths and Stephens

Many details of the engagement and eventual marriage of Jack Hills and Stella Duckworth were recorded in 1896–1897 by Stella's fifteen-year-old half sister Virginia in the first volume of her diary, which she subsequently revisited in autobiographical pieces, including "A Sketch of the Past."[8] In addition, significant new materials—letters between the lovers in the months preceding the wedding—surfaced in 2019.[9] Hills's long-protected privacy has now been undone, thanks to the Victorian habit of *writing everything down*, the modern fascination with everything connected to the Bloomsbury circle, and Hills's own decision to preserve the letters in the first place.

The portrait of Hills that arises from these sources is of a multidimensional man who was surprisingly emotional and lovestruck until blindsided by tragedy.

Informal photograph of Stella and Jack in 1896, likely taken by Vanessa Stephen. Jack appears to have a tight grip on his fiancée. The Tate Gallery holds an impressive collection of Vanessa's family photographs. Copyright Tate.

Woolf was powerfully affected by the story; she returned to the events again and again as she neared the end of her own life. The richest description of Hills was elaborated in a character study she wrote in 1939–1940, observing that Jack and Stella's romance was her first vision—"so intense, so exciting, so rapturous"—of love between a man and a woman.[10]

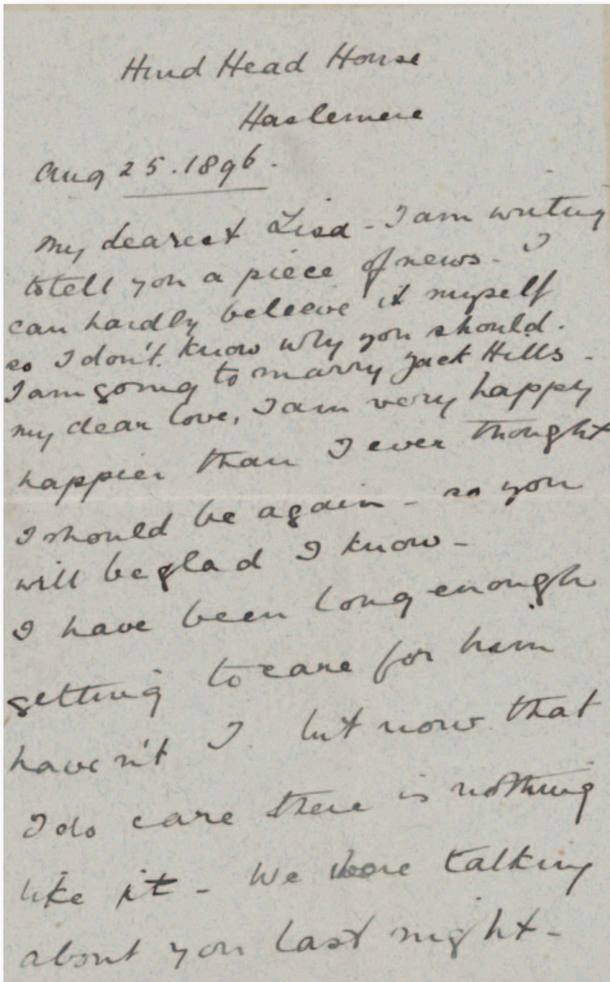
Woolf described Hills as a "passionate countryman": he "rode very well; he fished very well, and there was a vein of poetry in him."[11] He introduced the Stephen household—and its "distinguished literary, book-loving world"—to the wonders of country life and the natural world.[12] "He taught us to sugar trees; he gave us his copy of Morris's *Butterflies and Moths*, over which I spent many hours, hunting up our catches," she remembers with pleasure.[13]

Hills was "scrupulously clean . . . and scrupulously well-dressed, as a Victorian city solicitor;"[14] and refreshingly direct.

> He was scrupulously honest, honourable, in the Eton and Balliol sense, but there was more to his scrupulosity than that. It was he who first spoke to me openly and deliberately about sex. . . . He shocked me a little, wholesomely. . . . [Neither of her half brothers] would have spoken to any girl as cleanly, humorously, openly, about sex.[15]

Hills's courtship of Stella was prolonged and full of drama. She had many suitors, but it was Hills who prevailed in spite of her refusals. Victorian protocol required unsuccessful suitors to break off all contact after a rejection, as Hills apparently did, fleeing to the Norwegian wilderness for an extended salmon-fishing expedition. But when Stella's mother died in May 1895, Hills reappeared on the scene. The engagement was announced in mid-1896, and Woolf was able to closely observe the deepening of their relationship over the months that followed. Recalling the events twenty-

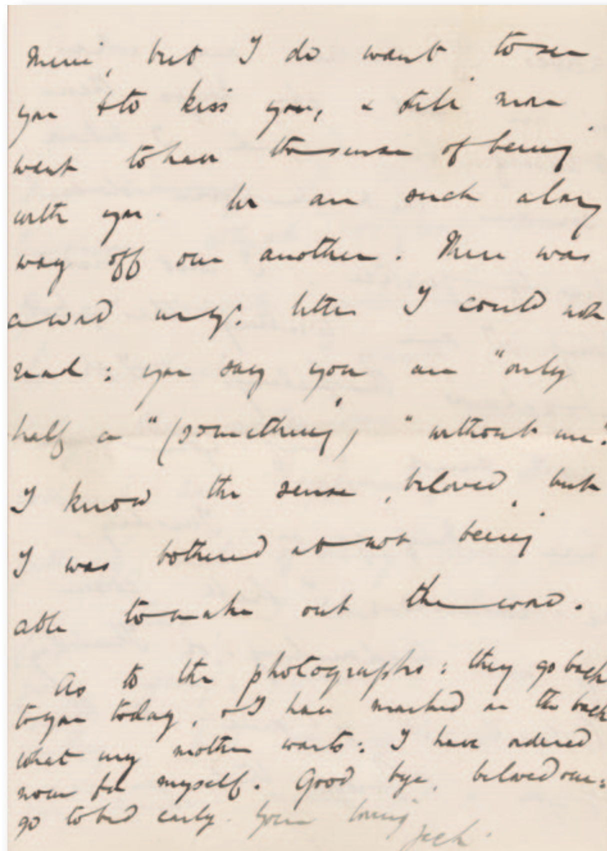
Previously unpublished photograph of Stella and Jack taken by Vanessa Stephen on 12 February 1897 on the seashore at Bognor Regis. Virginia describes the trip in dismal terms in an early diary entry, but on their return to London, she and Vanessa develop the pictures and discover "one very good one of Stella and Jack on the sands." Based on this reference, the archivist at the Tate identified the photo in the earliest family album in their collection. Copyright Tate.



Hind Head House
Haslemere
Aug 25. 1896.

My dearest Lisa - I am writing to tell you a piece of news - I can hardly believe it myself so I don't know why you should. I am going to marry Jack Hills - my dear love, I am very happy happier than I ever thought I should be again - so you will be glad I know - I have been long enough getting to care for him haven't I but now that I do care there is nothing like it - We were talking about you last night -

Letter dated 25 August 1896 from Stella Duckworth to her friend Lisa Stillman, announcing her engagement and confiding her initial hesitations about Jack Hills as a partner and her growing love for him. It is the only example of Stella's candid views about her fiancé in her own words. After Stella's death, Stillman sent Stella's letter to Hills, and it remained in his family's possession until it was acquired by the New York Public Library in 2019. Duckworth-Hills Papers, Henry and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature. With permission.



mine, but I do want to see you & to kiss you, ... want to have the sense of being with you. We are such a long way off one another. There was a word in your letter I could not read: you say you are "only half a 'something' without me:" I know the sense, beloved, but I was bothered at not being able to make out the word.

As to the photographs: they go back to you today, & I have marked on the back what my mother wants: I have ordered none for myself. Good bye, beloved one; go to bed early. Your loving Jack.

This letter dated 12 October 1896 is part of a pair of letters written by Jack to Stella when he was marooned at Corby Castle, shortly after their engagement. Jack clearly found it frustrating to be at such a far remove from Stella. Duckworth-Hills Papers, Henry and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library. With permission.

five years later, she wrote, "It still seems to me like a real thing, unsmothered by the succeeding years."[16]

Angler in Love

Hills's feelings were obvious, but Stella's not so much: "Certainly he was passionately in love; she at first passively," according to Woolf.[17] A recently discovered letter from Stella to a friend in August 1896 confirms this: "I have been long enough getting to care for him, haven't I," she writes, "but now I do care there is nothing like it."[18]

A trove of love letters from Hills to his fiancée has also been acquired by the Berg Collection (New York Public Library), which is replete with ardent yearnings. He is literally hanging on her every word; witness the palpable frustration at not being able to decipher the handwriting in the letter he received from her on 12 October 1896.

> I miss you every minute, nothing is the same without you. . . . Beloved, it is sweet to think of you and to know that you are mine, but I do want to see you and to kiss you. . . . There was a word in your letter I could not read: you say you are "only half a 'something' without me." I know the sense beloved but I was bothered at not being able to make out the word.[19]

Virginia happened upon one of Jack's love letters, dating from this same period. She was entranced by the line, "There is nothing sweeter in the whole world than our love" and put the letter down in a "quiver of ecstasy at the revelation."[20]

After their wedding in April, Stella and Jack left for Florence on their honeymoon, but the trip was cut short because of Stella's health. At home, she was placed under the care of two doctors, who later confirmed her pregnancy but failed to diagnose the appendicitis that worsened over the next three months. After emergency surgery at home on 18 July 1897, Stella died later that night, from peritonitis.[21]

Woolf was only able to write about Stella's death and its aftermath in 1907 ("Reminiscences"), and then again more than thirty years later, when she began to draft "A Sketch of the Past." It is painful to read of Hills's suffering during the months he remained in mourning (full Victorian style) at the Stephen household and at their summer retreat at Painswick. Every evening he was there,

Previously unpublished photograph of Jack Hills salmon fishing in his home waters, the River Eden, on 1 October 1897. About two months after Stella's death, Hills traveled to his family home at Corby Castle with Vanessa and Virginia. They watched him fishing and Virgina made a cryptic note in her diary that they "took photos." This is one of the few known images of Hills fly fishing, and the author is grateful to the Tate archivist for locating the image. Copyright Tate.

Jack would walk alone with either Virginia or Vanessa and would otherwise write to one or the other of them daily. Even the irascible Leslie Stephen, never an admirer of Hills, said "poor boy, he looks very bad."[22]

In late September, Hills and the Stephen sisters traveled to Corby Castle to stay with his family. Woolf's sketch of Hills's mother is withering: pretentious and cruel, she detested women (telling Virginia and Vanessa that she was "thankful she had no daughters") and was on distant terms with Jack, clearly her second son.[23] Hills later acknowledged to the sisters that his mother was a "hard" woman, "very selfish."[24]

On the River Eden, Woolf watched Hills fly fishing for the first time. After he hooked a salmon, she was "struck by his sudden exultation as the line tautened and he held the fish there in the river."[25] After those "desperate months," he looked triumphant, experiencing the grace of healing waters—not for the last time.[26]

Solicitor, MP, Soldier

Over the next few years Hills remained in contact with the Stephen family, especially with Vanessa, Virginia's elder sister, who later became an accomplished post-impressionist painter and central figure in the Bloomsbury circle. A crisis arose when Hills fell in love with Vanessa after the period of extended mourning for Stella, triggering much consternation when the family learned of their intention to travel together to Italy in 1900. The Duckworth family strongly disapproved, regarding the relationship as taboo and unlawful. As a result, the lovers' planned trip to Continental Europe (where they could have been wed) was scuppered.[27]

In spite of the controversy, Hills continued to play a variety of roles for the Stephen family. After Stella's death, he took over as guardian for Leslie Stephen's eldest daughter Laura, a disabled adult who remained a family secret.[28] Hills, Virginia, and Vanessa continued to see each other, attending Queen Victoria's grand funeral procession together in 1901.[29] In 1902, Jack and Virginia planned a literary project together, writing a play about a couple seemingly destined for each other but who spend a lifetime unable to connect.[30] Hills generously supported the sisters after Leslie Stephen died in 1904, renouncing part of his substantial inheritance from Stella in their favor and eventually bequeathing the entire capital to them upon his death.[31]

Hills qualified as a London solicitor in 1897 and practiced for many years at Roper & Whately and later at his own firm. In his memoir, he offers a careful corrective to the misconception (possibly created by *A Summer on the Test*) that he was a man of leisure, free to spend months at a time streamside. He writes of creating a busy practice in London, which meant that he gradually fished less and less. Nearly all his fishing, he writes, "has been holiday sport,"[32] because he had to earn a living; even as late as 1936 he "still [had] to work as hard as ever."[33]

Hills entered politics in 1906 and was elected as a Liberal-Unionist for the northern riding of Durham. Ironically, in 1907 the House of Commons passed into law the statute that would have legalized his planned marriage to Vanessa.[34] He had a long career, serving as a member of parliament for more than thirty years, winning multiple elections in three northern ridings. His only electoral defeats occurred between 1922 and 1925; thankfully, these wilderness years allowed him to pursue his literary career, freeing him up to fish the Test beginning in 1923 and continuing throughout 1924.

Hills explained in his memoirs that he was drawn to politics by the ardent social reformer Joseph Chamberlain, a charismatic figure from Birmingham. Although nominally a conservative, in his political convictions Hills was a moderate; "by his human sympathies" he was "turned . . . in the direction of women's suffrage, reform, education for the poor."[35]

At the age of forty-seven, Jack Hills joined the Durham Light Infantry, based in his home riding, soon after the war began. He served as captain and major, then ultimately acting lieutenant-colonel for the 20th Battalion, leading a force of more than 1,000 troops at the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. After two months of hellish conditions in the trenches, he lost more than 400 men.[36] The number of overall casualties beggars belief: in total, more than 1,000,000 soldiers died or were injured at the Somme over a period of four and a half months.[37] In late September, Hills was seriously wounded and sent back to England to recover. He was released from hospital in 1917 but "was not allowed to go back to France."[38]

Characteristically stoic, Hills had little to say in his memoirs or elsewhere about what must have been a shattering wartime experience. A window into his postwar state of mind can be found in Woolf's letters and diary from July 1918. She describes meeting Hills at a party—a dull affair except for her conversation with "Waller," as she sometimes calls him. Recalling their early years of intimacy, she finds him to remain "emphatic, sententious, & very trusty & kind."[39] And then she adds the shading: "I felt him pathetic too; so much seems to have gone

wrong for him"[40] although "he has weathered life with great credit."[41]

In a letter to Vanessa, she creates a lively portrait, respectful of her sister's abiding fondness for Hills. She quotes Waller at length, revealing a man at a crossroads who is looking back at his political and personal life, imagining different dimensions and directions. He says, "I am horrified at my age. Why, I'm 51."[42] He does enjoy making the sisters laugh, and he finds points in common:

> You and Nessa are both of you confirmed gamblers. Well, so am I. I have never been able to conform, my dear Ginia; that's whats [*sic*] the matter with me. I'm not in the hierarchy. I shall never be in government. No I've gambled and thrown away the game.[43]

These are not the sentiments of a satisfied parliamentarian twelve years into a career as a backbencher from the northern counties. Rather, this is a man restless to pursue a different game he had never thrown away. He did not have far to seek.

Angler and Scholar: Back to the Books with *A History*

Hills published his magisterial *A History of Fly Fishing for Trout* in 1921, and given its encyclopedic nature, he likely began serious research sometime after the end of the war in 1918. We know he had been collecting books on fly fishing since 1890, the same year he first visited the River Test.[44] By the time he turned his mind to the history project, he had access to collections extending back to the foundational texts from the fifteenth century.

The scope of the project was daunting and must have required a degree of obsessiveness to complete the investigation of so many British and European sources. Hills chose an apt motto: *La pêche est ma folie* (fishing is my folly). For the author, there may also have been a therapeutic benefit to the exercise of gathering and analyzing the more than 150 principal works that populate the *History*.[45]

Hills's tragic war experience surfaces tellingly in the first chapter, where he penned the saddest lines he ever wrote. In the course of a scholarly discussion of sources for Dame Juliana Berners's *Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle*, Hills recounts the story of an old manuscript on fishing, dating from 1000 CE. It was found at the abbey of Saint Bertin in Saint-Omer in northern France. In the 1840s, antiquaries had apparently gathered at Arras to present a paper on the discovery. Major Hills was painfully familiar with that area of France, as it was part of the Western Front, and he tells the reader:

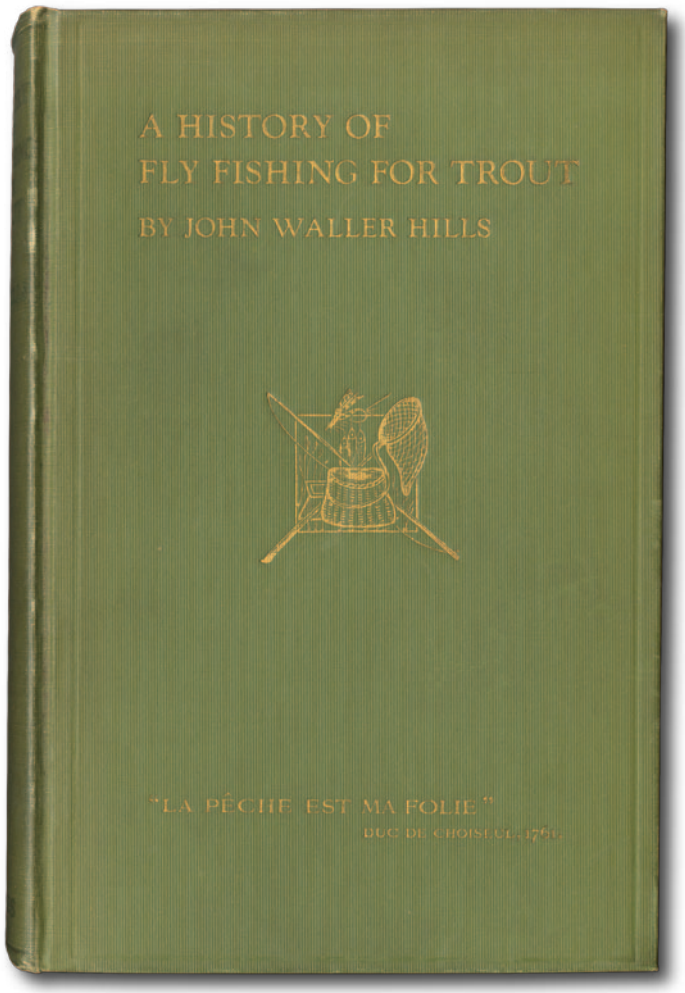
> Since that paper was read much has happened at Arras in Artois. Many have gone there who never heard of it before, and who have gone there for other purposes than to listen to learned disquisitions on a peaceful sport. . . . Many have made that journey and have not returned.[46]

This grimly understated passage is more powerful for what it doesn't say, conjuring immeasurable regret and losses without making any direct reference to the war. It was as close as Hills ever got to a commentary on his experience.

The *History* is a meticulously annotated bibliography of the landmark texts of angling literature, both renowned and obscure. It is a resolutely scholarly work, full of carefully parsed judgments on individual writers, measuring their sources, originality, and morals, and ranking them on the paramount issue of literary style.

Hills clearly had a project in mind, beyond the obvious task of tracking the sport of fly fishing for trout from its origins. I believe the underlying purpose of the *History* was to develop a full-fledged aesthetic for angling literature, which he would follow in his own subsequent writings. To do this, he identified his models—particularly Izaak Walton, Charles Cotton, and the little-known William Lawson—and then attempted to understand and explain the roots of their genius and possibly gain a place among them. We can see the results of this exercise—namely the development of Hills's distinctive voice beginning with the *History* itself—in *The Golden River* (1922) and subsequently in his masterpiece, *A Summer on the Test*.

Looking at the *History* as a whole, it is clear that Walton's "simple Arcadian style"[47] holds the highest ranking among all the writers; Hills devotes two sections to him, highlighting those ineffable "aspects of fishing difficult to express which no one has shown better than he."[48] The charm of Walton's style "lies in the revelation which it gives of the



The cover of the first edition of A History of Fly Fishing for Trout *(London: Philip Allan & Co., 1921), featuring the motto* "La pêche est ma folie."

man. Behind the printed page there always stands Walton himself, shrewd and critical, but also tolerant and kindly."[49] He is master of a "style which lives because it is individual."[50] Somehow Walton's prose is able "to instil into our minds a harmony for which we have been searching unconsciously."[51] The matching of style to subject matter is perfect. The "love of fishing was woven inextricably with love of books and love of English country life,"[52] a description that would apply equally to Hills himself. Woolf observed, "[Jack] always seems fresh from the country."[53]

A more obscure choice of model is William Lawson, whose fly-fishing contribution is limited to notes he wrote in 1620 for John Dennys's poem "Secrets of Angling." Hills greatly admired Lawson's style, which anticipated Walton in its simplicity and vigor: "You must fish in, or hard by, the stream, and have a quick hand and a ready eye and a nimble rod, strike with him or you loose him. . . . When you have hookt him, give him leave, keeping your Line stright, and hold him from rootes and he will tyre himselfe. This is the chiefe pleasure of Angling."[54]

In the *History*, you can detect the distinctive voice of Hills, nascent but ringing clear, in judgmental, discerning, and humorous tones. He has no patience for derivative scribblers, scorning Gervase Markham's "irresistible propensity to loot"[55] from earlier authors, and saying of F. M. Halford's reputation that it "would stand higher had he written less."[56]

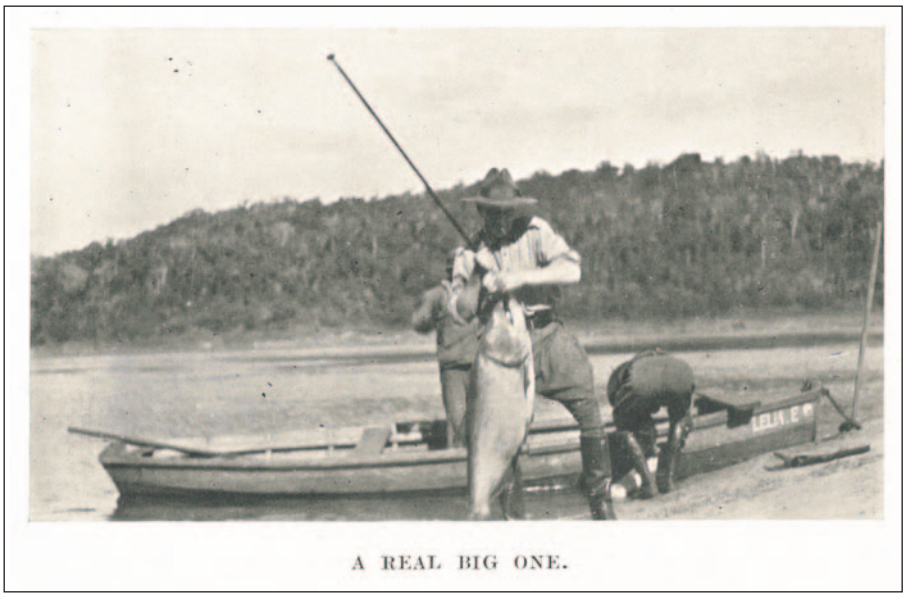
Hills can't resist trying out his own voice to describe the landscape of Hampshire and Wiltshire in a chapter ostensibly about the advent of the dry fly. It clearly anticipates the structure and subject matter of *A Summer on the Test*, charting an angler's perceptions of the seasons on a river, month by month, beginning in April. It is a lovely set piece, written by an acknowledged "late comer in the field . . . reluctant to embark on it."[57] It may seem out of place in the *History*, but it is vivid and closely observed: in May, the landscape's "special character is that it shews so many different shades of green, and shews them all together. . . . the chief cause of the valley's beauty is reflected light . . . reflected at all angles off the glancing water."[58] This is the first example of Hills in his lyrical mode, which will be perfected in *A Summer on the Test* and later in *My Sporting Life*.

The Golden River

In September 1921, after the *History* was published, Hills embarked on a three-month journey to South America, traveling through the tropical jungles of Paraguay in search of unexplored waters and a little-known game fish called the dorado. Pushing 200 miles up the Paraná River, it was the stuff of pure adventure: massive rapids and waterfalls, crocodiles, an occasional corpse, rumors of an imminent insurrection, and 40-pound golden fish that fought like salmon in the heavy currents. As a setting, it evokes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* more than the scholarly world Hills inhabited for his first book.[59]

The Golden River is the chronicle of that South American odyssey. Its two authors—Hills and his companion Ianthe Dunbar—each contributed their own chapters, creating a hybrid narrative that is never knitted together in a way that is enriched by the two perspectives.[60] Dunbar adopted a travelog style to catalog curious sights and characters, and a tone that resembles a letter designed to amaze friends back home. She also created the photographs and sketches that accompany the text. Hills wrote ten solid chapters about fishing, covering the full range of ichthyology, tactics, gear, and the business of finding fish, hooking them, and landing them. These are his first published fish stories and one of the first creditable accounts of the pursuit of dorado for English-speaking readers.

Left: This sketch of Jack Hills shows him fishing for dorado in the Paraná River in Paraguay. Hills's companion Ianthe Dunbar created the drawings and took the photographs which illustrate The Golden River *(London: Philip Allan & Co., 1922), 85.*


A REAL BIG ONE.

Above: The size of the dorado and the heavy currents in the Paraná led Hills to use heavy spinning gear: 10-foot split-cane or greenheart rods with a piano wire trace, heavy weights, and 1-ounce copper spoons. Photograph by Ianthe Dunbar, originally published in The Golden River *(London: Philip Allan & Co., 1922), facing page 68.*

The book shows Hills trying out a different voice in a different genre: the heart-thumping big-fish tale in an exotic locale. Hills was able to bring the reader along as he attempts to solve the technical problems presented by the massive size of the river and the fighting capabilities of the dorado. Hills later explained that there were "two classes of waters that make the highest appeal to the imagination and emotion," the Paraná clearly being among "those which are unknown and unfished, whose mysterious depths may contain anything, and which you are the first to explore."[61]

The strongest writing occurs in the chapter called "The First Day's Fishing." Hills surveys this brave new world with eyes wide open for wonder and in a "state of glorious uncertainty."[62]

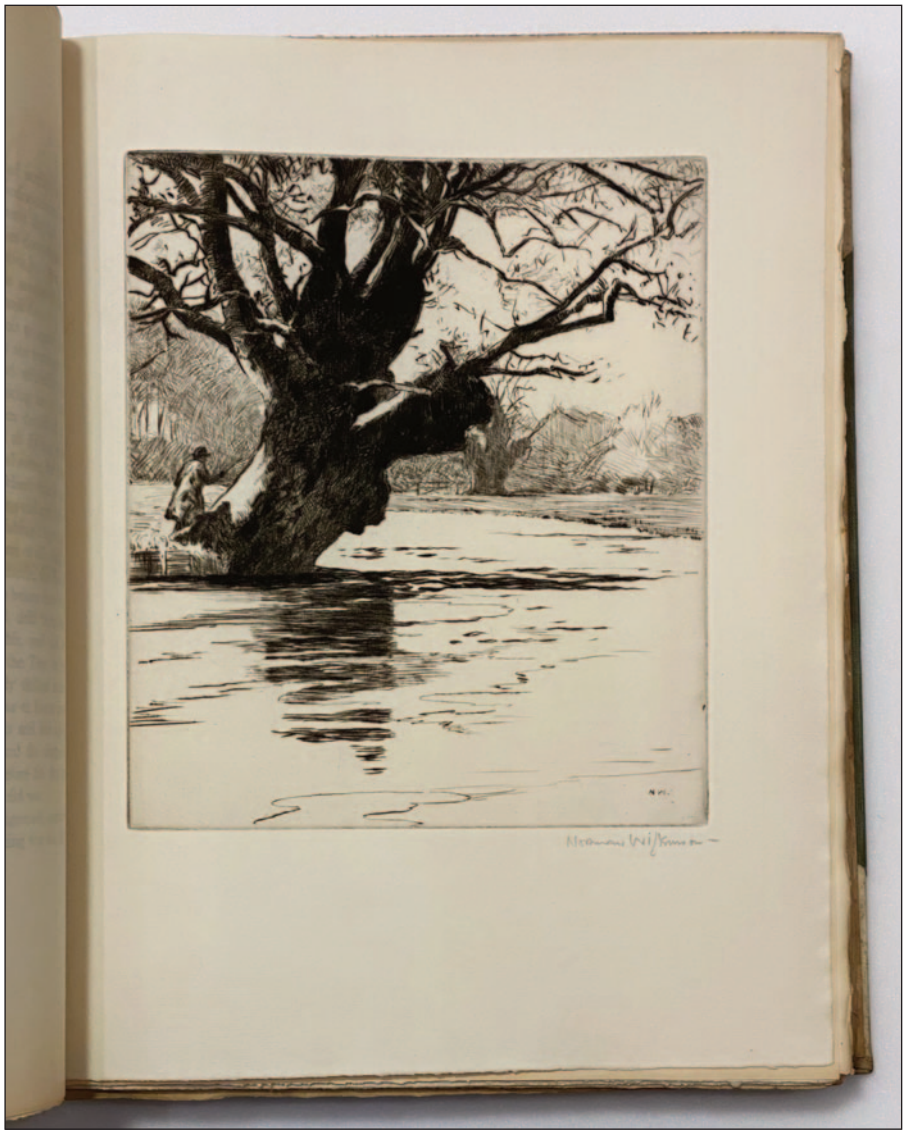
> All round, and on both sides of the river, the tropical forest fell like a curtain. Tall trees, different tones of a sombre green, and delicate bamboos like immense feathery asparagus, were roped together by lianas, making impenetrable walls . . .[63]

Starting with his first cast, Hills hooks and loses dorado after resplendent dorado, each "glowing with a pure deep gold, his tail splashed with a crimson bar."[64] And so begins his account of the Paraná, which is remarkable for the number of huge fish (20 to 40 pounds) and the corresponding number of angling mishaps and disasters he encounters, in spite of the heavy spinning tackle he used. He confesses to multiple tactical mistakes that prompt him to rethink his approach while he reflects on his emotions and engages his dynamic analytical skills. He is relentlessly interested in what went wrong. As Woolf noted, he was a scrupulously honest man, and this trait naturally led to a signature self-searching narrative framework for his fishing, involving moments of well-executed casts and presentations coupled frequently with more failures than triumphs. It mirrored the peaks and valleys of life itself, and from this point forward, it was part of his continuing appeal for readers.

A Summer on the Test: The Project and the Conceit

In late 1922, soon after the publication of *The Golden River*, Jack Hills lost his parliamentary seat in an election for the first time, and he would not be reelected until 1925. This created new opportunities, including a sustained period of trout fishing in the chalk streams of Hampshire at a level and frequency that had not been possible since his days on the River Eden.

Sara Wilcox



Norman Wilkinson's dry-point etching The Leaning Oak, Mottisfont *was included in the first and second editions of* A Summer on the Test. *Hills leased the water at Mottisfont for the whole season of 1924. This image comes from the deluxe edition (one of only twenty-five large-paper copies), with the plates signed by the artist Norman Wilkinson. AMFF Permanent Collection, Charles Thacher Collection. 2021.035.252.*

In the summer of 1923, Hills began working on the new project that would become *A Summer on the Test* with his publisher Philip Allan and the illustrator Norman Wilkinson, a master of dry-point etchings.[65] Wilkinson was an accomplished landscape and marine artist, as well as a keen fly fisherman who began to collaborate with Hills on expeditions to the Test and its tributaries to fish and to work up the images for the new book. They spent a week together on the Bourne in late August. On their last day, with Hills's guidance, Wilkinson landed "three brace of golden trout" before lunch, which became the subject matter of a fine etching some weeks later.[66] By October, publication details were beginning to take shape: a limited edition of 325 copies to be printed on handmade paper in a large format to reflect their grand ambitions.[67] It was clear from the beginning that this story would be told in a higher register than *The Golden River*.

Although the River Test was "famous throughout history for its salmon and trout,"[68] Hills believed the river lacked its own literary chronicler. His project for 1924 would remedy that situation by creating a worshipful portrait of the Test Valley and its storied fishery, embodying his own aesthetic for the higher forms of angling literature. The author had big plans: constructing a new form of fishing book that blended astute advice with lyricism and rich interior monologues revealing a fisherman's emotional life, knee-deep in moving waters.

A Summer on the Test became a work of enduring literary appeal, evidenced by its publication history, which spans at least eight editions over the past 100 years.[69] The first edition (1924) was a lovely book, but it is the second edition (1930)—designed for a wider audience with extensive revisions and seven new chapters—on which its reputation is founded. As to what actually happened that summer, there is also Hills's later memoir, *My Sporting Life*, which contains contemporary journal entries from the 1920s as well as late-life reflections. These entries and commentaries serve as both urtext and coda, unlocking some of the abiding puzzles contained in Hills's accounts.

With *A Summer on the Test*, Hills chose one of the best titles in angling literature. Nicely understated, it manages to convey modesty and focus (just one summer, just one river) while framing the progress of the season (beginning in April and ending on 12 September 1924, when he signs off his preface) with hopes of a warm reception from his audience. The title embodies a conceit, evoking Aristotelian unity of time and place, and one man's singular perspective. The title is also misleadingly simple, as I came to appreciate.

On the Test, trout season begins in April. In 1924, as Hills started to record the events that were intended to define *A Summer on the Test*, expectations ran high. He had fished many different sections of the river since 1890 as opportunities arose through friends and his older brother. The book project called for a higher commitment, leading him to take a rod—for the first time—at Mottisfont, downstream from Stockbridge, for "the whole season on the same water."[70] Hills gives the reader an idyllic Waltonian point of entry:

> [S]o let us open the gate once more and walk the well-known path through the shining water meadows and over the plank bridge, across the dark, still carrier and over the sunlit runner, back to the banks of our famous river.[71]

But expectations soon needed adjustment. As he starkly records, April 1924 presented Hills with many days fishing under the cruelest conditions T. S. Eliot[72] could imagine: "bitter north winds, frequent hail and occasional snow" were followed by "a series of gales . . . culminating in a regular hurricane on the 27th."[73] Hills admits only that he fished "somewhat unsuccessfully" because of the weather and an "exceptional number of bungles."[74] One very heavy fish, he writes, "defeated me . . . in a manner which I cannot bear to recall."[75]

Hills was a frank truth-telling angler, so why could he not bring himself to share the details of this defeat in *A Summer on the Test*? Hills's method was attuned to a judicious mixing of darkness and light; for every triumph, there was often a countervailing blunder. But in this first fishing chapter, already weighed down by gloomy circumstances of weather, Hills needed to establish his chops as a capable literary angler. So he slid past the mishaps, crafting a transformative passage about the vernal river valley coming to life again, and then showing how a discouraged angler could find salvation even in a dark and miserable April.

Near the end of the chapter, Hills pays a Wordsworthian tribute to the early April flowers: "[T]here is a wash of green on the willows, the banks are tufted with primroses, and the kingcup makes broad patches of liquid gold over the meadows. . . . Every day, also, the summer birds are arriving and one by one you can greet them all again."[76] And then he charts the emotional calculus of the season, finding a way to bring light to a month that was black and cold.

> [T]he chief joys of April are anticipation and the sense that you are getting something for nothing. All the best of the year is in front of you, and you have not used it up yet. However bad your luck, nothing is wasted. The real season has not begun. And so, if you do get a good day, it is something additional and unexpected, something that was not in the programme, a pure gain, unlooked for and welcome: and if you get a bad one, there is no loss. It is this, and the delicious beginning of flower and leaf, which make April so enjoyable.[77]

This is a fine example of Hills's particular genius as the self-aware angler who brings his fluid, questing mind to life for the reader. Following Walton's model, Hills presents himself through an individualized voice that is unmistakably his own, tempering emotions with logic, gains with losses, in a tone that bespeaks an author who has confronted heartbreak and for whom so much has gone wrong.

Truth be told, Hills's trout fishing on the Test in 1924 was a disaster—not just in April, but from start to finish. His total, for the whole period, amounted to forty-two fish landed over five and a half months, according to his log in *My Sporting Life*: "I had a bad season," he records there. "I do not know whether other anglers are similarly afflicted, but . . . I have whole years when I fish badly. 1924 was one. I know of no reason."[78]

Fortunately, Hills could draw on a lifetime of other chalk-stream memories, and in spite of its title, *A Summer on the Test* is full of stories from other rivers and years other than 1924. The climactic episode of the book is related in the wonderful chapter called "The Evening Rise," which focuses on dry-fly fishing in midsummer using big sedge (caddis) patterns. The year is 1903, and the river is the Kennet in neighboring Wiltshire, a fact that was initially lost on me and I suspect many other readers. It's a perfect fish story: it has three movements and is structured like a religious experience, beginning with the commission of a lamentable sin. A hatch comes on in the late afternoon, and Hills locates a large trout steadily rising under tough conditions.

> [I]t was a long throw, and the wind horrible: I could not reach him and like a fool I got rattled and pulled off too much line: there was an agonized groan from my friend behind me when a great curl of it was slapped on the water exactly over the trout's nose. We looked at each other without speaking, and he silently walked away up the river, leaving me staring stupidly at the spot where the fish had been rising.[79]

Two hours later, Hills returns to the site of his calamity to find the world transformed.

> The wild wind had blown itself out and had swept the sky bare of cloud. Silence had come, and stillness. The willows, which all through the long summer day had bowed and chattered in the wind, were straightened and motionless, each individual leaf hanging down as if carved in jade . . .[80]

He enters a state of transcendence, described with a Walton-like ability to access the ineffable.

> There had occurred that transition, that transmutation from noise and movement to silence and peace . . . when a windy summer day turns over to a moveless summer night: when the swing and clatter and rush of the day is arrested and lifted from the world, and you get the sense that the great hollow of the air is filled with stillness and quiet, as with a tangible presence.[81]

He looks some ways upstream and sees a rise, "one of those small movements, difficult to place. It might be a very large fish or a very small one."[82] He convinces himself it is only a half-pound trout, but full redemption is near.

> I cast. I was looking right into the west, and the water was coloured like skim milk by reflection from where the sun had set. My silver sedge was as visible as by day. It floated down, there was a rise, I struck, and something rushed upstream. Then I knew.[83]

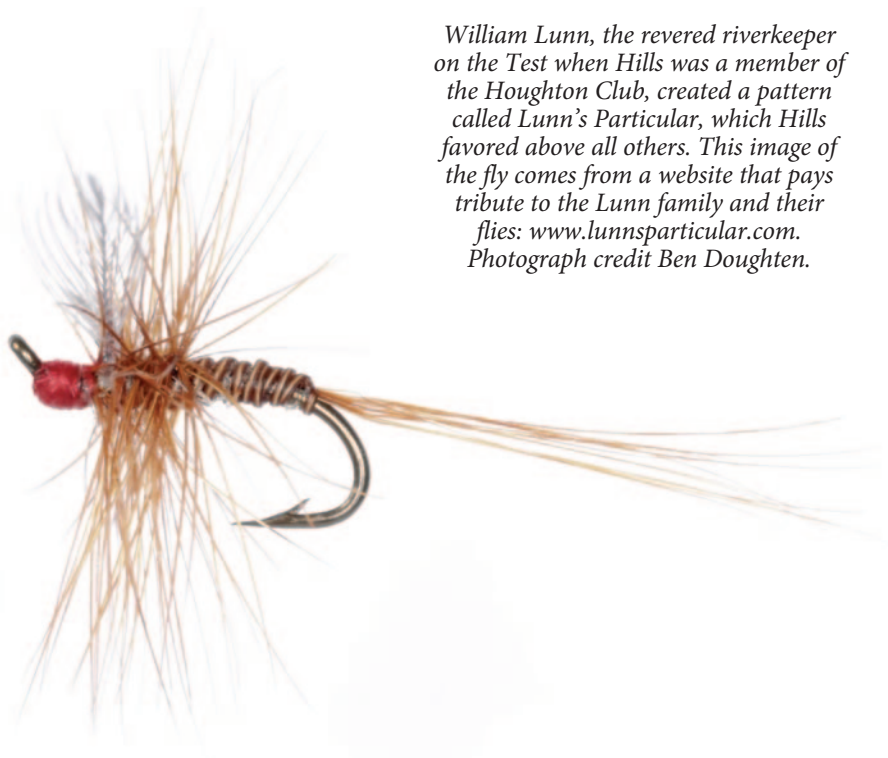
After a long struggle and two bungled attempts at the net, Hills lands a 4-pound, 8-ounce trout, the largest he ever caught on a floating fly, a well-orchestrated climax even if it arrived at some distance from the summer of 1924 and the River Test itself.

The Houghton Years

Hills was elected as a member of the Houghton Club in late 1924, and he had five more summers of the Test on the club's renowned water at Stockbridge, acclaimed for the size of its trout and its exclusivity. Hills came to admire the riverkeeper William Lunn, whom he regarded as a genius at deciphering the myriad overlapping hatches of the Stockbridge beats and the feeding preferences of challenging trout. He benefited from Lunn's rigorous teachings and his superb fly patterns, especially Lunn's Particular. He would later write a detailed biography of Lunn called *River Keeper* that describes his preternatural skills.[84]

The Houghton period was important because the exposure to Lunn and his fishery allowed Hills to enhance the second edition of *A Summer on the Test* (1930), adding more than seventy new pages of text.[85] The book was materially improved with new atmospheric chapters ("The Harvest Moon" offers an unexpected tale of night fishing on the Test), and there are fine technical pieces on specific hatches ("The Blue-winged Olive") and nymph fishing. Along with its literary merits, the book is also an insightful, pragmatic guide to chalkstream fishing. The patterns may be different, but the watercraft is remarkably current: if you only absorb his thoughts on throwing a curve cast or an upstream soft-hackle fly, your fishing will be well served. On my first trip to Hampshire in 1999, I relied on a well-worn copy of his book that I found at the Winchester Bookshop. I continue to find new wisdom each time I read anything by Hills, most recently realizing that his use of a piece of white wool as an indicator anticipated the modern New Zealand nymph rig by nearly 100 years.

For Hills, the Houghton years coincided with a political resurrection and a big change in his personal life. He returned to Parliament to represent Ripon in December 1925, a seat he held until his death in 1938. And he began to receive other significant recognition from the government, culminating in a lifetime appointment to the Privy Council of the United Kingdom in 1929 and later the conferment of a baronetcy.[86] So Hills's dark comments in 1918, lamenting his role as a perpetual outsider—"not in the hierarchy . . . never . . . in government"[87]—turned out to be unfounded. I remain convinced that Hills's career, in all respects, was advanced by his literary success and particularly the trio of fishing books that defined that period of his life.



William Lunn, the revered riverkeeper on the Test when Hills was a member of the Houghton Club, created a pattern called Lunn's Particular, which Hills favored above all others. This image of the fly comes from a website that pays tribute to the Lunn family and their flies: www.lunnsparticular.com. Photograph credit Ben Doughten.

In 1931, thirty-four years after the death of his first wife, Hills remarried. Mary Grace Ashton was a young British writer who published her first novel, *Race*, in 1927, when she was just nineteen.[88] She published six novels in the 1920s and 1930s, and Hills eventually dedicated *My Sporting Life* to her "as a small return for the pleasure her books have given me."[89]

My Sporting Life

Published in 1936, Hills's final work rested in obscurity until 2000, when a limited edition was published as part of the Flyfisher's Classic Library. *My Sporting Life* is a mélange of fishing stories, hunting stories, and journal entries, set in locales exotic and familiar, along with some notable companions: political and literary figures, riverkeepers, and angling legends. The revelations of Hills's life as a north country angler fill out his portrait in unexpected ways.

After a lifetime of fishing the "gracious valleys of Hampshire," he looks back to the River Eden—"of all rivers . . . the loveliest"—for experiences "neither Test nor Itchen can give."[90] He learned essential watercraft there: the ability "to stare over the broken water of an unknown river to make sure of where the trout will be lying."[91] Hills compared that experience to sitting for exams at Oxford, translating a "piece of unseen Latin or Greek . . . So with a new river: I can read it, make sense of it, I know where trout are, and where they are not."[92]

Hills celebrates the gear and tactics of Cumbria, at a far remove from chalkstream practices. What was Hills's favorite rod among the many built "by the most famous makers in England and America"?[93] The keeper at Corby Castle chose it for him in the 1890s: "It consisted of a piece of whole bamboo with a lancewood top spliced on. Length . . . seventeen feet."[94] He never had another "rod sweeter to cast and throwing a longer line."[95] In the end, it was broken by a friend and Hills "grieved sorely" as it could not be mended.[96]

True to his roots as a Cumbrian angler, Hills confesses his love of creeper fishing on the Eden. Faithfully he returned there from London for many years in mid-May. *Creeper* was the local name for a large stonefly nymph, and the practice was to gather the live nymphs from the underside of river rocks and bind them to a two-hook rig that was attached to the tippet. The bait was gently cast upstream with a fly rod and dead-drifted through the shallowest runs and riffles. It required acute eyesight and a sixth sense to detect the slightest interruption of a drift. Hills knew that it would "appear mighty strange to some, strange and degraded," but "[y]ear after year," he says, "I returned, and I should do so again."[97] He credits the lowly creeper with lessons of great value: it

taught him how to cast to individual fish he could not see, where "Not a single throw is made on chance . . . (and) you must know your river in all its moods and tenses."[98]

The Last Word Goes to Virginia

As she neared the end of her life, Virginia Woolf returned again and again to record her thoughts about Jack Hills. Her last piece was a book review called "Fishing," published posthumously in 1947 in a collection of essays selected from her papers by Leonard Woolf.[99] As he admitted in his editorial note, some of the essays exist in an early stage, which his wife would have revised if she had lived. "Fishing" is clearly a draft; the giveaway is the glaring failure to identify the book under review anywhere in the piece. This has led to some scholarly mischief: subsequent writers have assumed that Woolf must have been celebrating *A Summer on the Test*, Hills's most successful book.[100] However, there are obvious textual clues about the provenance of "Fishing": the review includes many direct quotations, all of which come from *My Sporting Life*, as I eventually discovered.

Woolf admired Jack Hills more as she grew older, and the review is full of praise for his memoir. She was a gifted reader and critic, and she marveled at the effects achieved in his prose, given that he had spent so much of his life as a politician. Her essay is not a comprehensive review but rather a celebration of the best literary passages, highlighting his ability to capture moments of transcendence in the natural world, moments that evoke Wordsworth's "spots of time/that with distinct pre-eminence retain/a renovating virtue."[101] She describes the effect on her as a reader.

> All books are made of words, but mostly of words that flutter and agitate thought. This book on the contrary, though made of words, has a strange effect on the body. It lifts it out of the chair; stands it on the banks of a river, and strikes it dumb.[102]

Two quotations in the review showcase Hills's lyricism.

> As I walked down I heard its varied cadence, obscured during sunlight, at one moment deep, then clamorous, then where thick beech trees hid the river subdued to a murmur. . . . The flowering trees had long since lost their blossoms, but on coming to a syringa bush, I walked suddenly into its scent and was drenched as in a bath.[103]

And:

> The trees had their young light leaves, some of them golden, the wild cherry was covered with drifts of snow and the ground was covered with dog mercury, looking as though it had been newly varnished. . . . I felt receptive to every sight, every colour and every sound, as though I walked through a world from which a veil had been withdrawn.[104]

Hills would have been gratified to read Woolf's "enthralled reflections"[105] and to see the examples of his prose that she selected. These passages embody the Waltonian standard he set for himself: through simple but revelatory language, they show and instill in us the hidden harmony for which we have been searching. She leaves us with a question to which we have a ready answer: "Is it possible that to remove veils from trees it is necessary to fish—our conscious mind must be all body, and then the unconscious mind leaps to the top and strips off veils?"[106]

One hundred years later, we can still garner all sorts of wisdom from the works of John Waller Hills. We know the cardinal virtues of fly fishing: stealth, persistence, vision, self-awareness, and the absence of dogma. We know exactly how far upstream of a feeding trout to place the dry fly. We know how long to wait before setting the hook on a big rising fish. We know how to better our methods and mend our hearts after failure. We are delighted to know that sandpipers "hide their dappled eggs on the shingly margins."[107] And finally, we know that a fishing book with a modest title can raise the veil and open our senses to rapture and transcendence wherever in the world our angling leads us.

Endnotes

1. The claim appears on the front panel of the dust jacket of John Waller Hills, *A Summer on the Test*, 3rd edition (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1941).

2. John Waller Hills, *A Summer on the Test* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1924), ix. Even at the time of the first edition and the second, which followed in 1930 (and from which I will take all subsequent quotes), Hills had concerns about threats to the "stainless" purity of the Test and the presence of invasive species, which then included grayling. Pollution and the abstraction of water for both the growing population in Hampshire and agricultural purposes are now raising significant alarms among riverkeepers, anglers, and conservationists.

3. John Waller Hills, *My Sporting Life* (Ashburton, U.K.: The Flyfisher's Classic Library, 2000), 26. The original book was published in 1936 but not reissued until 2000. Hills made his purpose clear: "This book is not the story of the whole of my life. Far from it" (26). In 1925, he discussed with Virginia Woolf the difficulty of writing an autobiography, saying: "But could one tell the truth? About one's affairs with women? About one's parents?" See Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III: 1925–1930 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), 34.

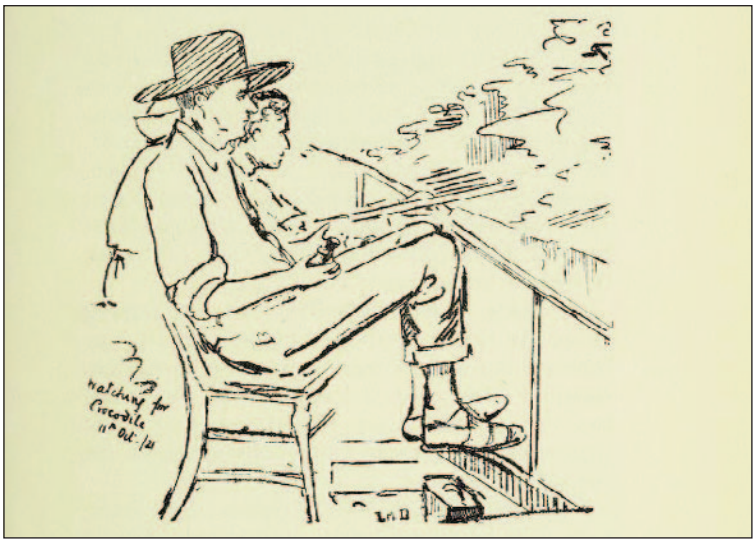
4. Hills, *My Sporting Life*, 10.

5. The Bloomsbury Group was an influential collection of post-impressionist artists, writers, and intellectuals who lived and worked together in central London from 1905 to 1930. The core members included Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, Clive Bell, John Maynard Keynes, and Lytton Strachey. Dorothy Parker allegedly said that "they lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles." Although many secondary sources attribute this quote to Parker (e.g., Eleanor Jones, "Painting in Circles and Loving in Triangles: The Bloomsbury Group's Queer Way of Seeing," *The Conversation* [17 April 2017], 4), it appears there is no real evidence that Parker said it, and there is another likely source. Woolf scholar Stuart N. Clarke discovered a 1928 novel by Margaret Irwin called *Fire Down Below* (London: William Heinemann, 1928), in which a character describes "Gloomsbury" on page 109 with the line: "It is a circle . . . composed of a few squares where all the couples are triangles" (discussed in Stuart N. Clarke, "Squares Where All the Couples Are Triangles," *Virginia Woolf Bulletin* [No. 57, January 2018], 42–45). The quote everyone now uses is probably just a polished version of that line.

6. Virginia Woolf, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. II: 1912–1922 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), 257. In this same letter, Hills was also quoted as saying that he "suffered all (his) life from having no sisters" (256).

7. Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, new edition (London: Pimlico/Random House, 2002), 115. Stella was a dutiful daughter, catering to the demands of her domineering stepfather much more than Virginia and Vanessa did. But when Mr. Stephen insisted that Stella and Jack remain at home with him after their marriage so that she could continue as his indispensable caregiver, that was the final straw. The couple took a house down the street, much to Mr. Stephen's displeasure; he "could never hear the marriage spoken of without a profound groan" (23).

8. Woolf, *Moments*, 105–16, 144–46. Aside from her letters and diaries, the richest primary source about the life of Virginia Woolf is the set of autobiographical manuscripts first published in 1975 (with an expanded version in 1985) in *Moments of Being*. The collection includes two longer sections in a memoir format—"Reminiscences" (1–30) and "A Sketch of the Past" (78–160)—which together represent a revealing account of her early life, including many references to Jack Hills. "Reminiscences" dates from 1908 and "A Sketch of the



Hills helps keep watch for crocodiles on the Iguazú River in a Dunbar sketch from The Golden River *(London: Philip Allan & Co., 1922), 35.*

Past" from April 1939 to November 1940, four months before her death. Hills had died on Christmas eve in 1938 (as Woolf noted), and this may have motivated her to write about him again in detail at this time.

9. The Duckworth-Hills Papers form part of the remarkable Henry and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature of the New York Public Library, comprising letters, photographs, and related materials from the estate of Mary Hills, second wife of John Waller Hills. The collection was purchased and first became available to the public in 2019. Hereafter, Berg Collection.

10. Woolf, *Moments*, 113.

11. Ibid., 111. Woolf mentions Hills's love of poetry repeatedly in her diary and memoir, expressing surprise at the depth of his knowledge of contemporary writers.

12. Ibid., 113.

13. Ibid. Woolf and Hills shared a lifelong interest in butterflies and moths, dating back to her teenage years when he taught the family about "sugaring": the practice of coating trees with syrup overnight to attract insects for collection purposes.

14. Ibid., 112.

15. Ibid., 112–13. Note the sharp contrast Woolf draws between Hills and her half brothers George and Gerald Duckworth on sexual matters. Woolf recounted a number of episodes of sexual abuse perpetrated by the brothers—"malefactions" to use her word—she suffered both as a young girl and subsequently, which she first made public in a speech to Bloomsbury's Memoir Club in 1920 or 1921. See Woolf, *Moments*, 42, 171; Virginia Woolf, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, *The Flight of the Mind: The Letters of Virginia Woolf,* vol. I: 1888–1912 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), 472; and Gillian Gill, *Virginia Woolf and the Women Who Shaped Her World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 196–97.

16. Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. II: 1920–1924 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), 190.

17. Woolf, *Moments*, 113.

18. Stella Duckworth, letter to Lisa Stillman, 25 August 1896, Duckworth-Hills Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

19. John Waller Hills, letter to Stella Duckworth, 12 October 1896, Duckworth-Hills Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

20. Woolf, *Moments*, 114.

21. See Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897–1909*, ed. Mitchell Leaska (London: The Hogarth Press, 1992), 77–115, for a detailed account of Stella's failing health leading to her death.

22. Woolf, *Moments*, 144.

23. Ibid., 111.

24. Woolf, *Diary*, vol. III, 34.

25. Woolf, *Moments*, 111.

26. Ibid.

27. Woolf, *Moments*, 145. Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), 31. The Duckworths were technically right; an antiquated provision in British law made it unlawful for a widower to marry the sister of his deceased wife, although it was perfectly legal across Europe, the United States, and even the British colonies. The law was only changed in 1907; see endnote 34.

28. Laura Stephen was the daughter of Leslie Stephen and his first wife, Minnie Thackery. She suffered from significant mental health issues from an early age and was eventually institutionalized. See Gillian Gill, *Virginia Woolf and the Women Who Shaped Her World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 104–24.

29. John Waller Hills, letter to Anna Hills, 3 February 1901, Duckworth-Hills Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library. Hills gives a detailed account of the funeral procession in a long letter to his mother. The tickets he bought for Virginia and Vanessa cost "a small fortune."

30. Woolf, *The Flight of the Mind*, vol. I, 60. Woolf's excitement as a twenty-year-old about the project was charming: "I'm going to write a great play which shall be all talk too. . . . That is a plan of mine and Jacks—we are going to write it together—it could be done Im sure. Im going to have a man and a woman—show them growing up—never meeting—not knowing each other—but all the time you'll feel them come nearer and nearer . . . but when they almost meet—only a door between—you see how they just miss and go off at a tangent, and never come anywhere nearer again. There'll be oceans of talk and emotions without end" (original spelling retained).

31. Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, 48, and Virginia Woolf, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf,* vol. VI: 1936–1941 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 372n.

32. Hills, *My Sporting Life*, 26.

33. Ibid. See also pages 34–35, which further discuss the demands of his career.

34. The "Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act 1907" (7 Edw. 7. c. 47) received royal assent in August 1907 after strenuous debate in the House of Commons and particularly in the House of Lords. The legislative process required votes in the House of Commons for the first, second, and third readings of the bill over the course of spring and summer 1907, but the relevant voting logs in Hansard show no record of Hills entering a vote at any stage. Perhaps it was too close to the bone.

35. Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. I: 1915–1919 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), 170.

36. Hills left no personal account of his war experience. Regimental records are sparse, according to the research conducted by Tony Hayter in his excellent introduction to the Classic Flyfisher's Library edition of *My Sporting Life* (Tony Hayter, "Introduction," in John Waller Hills, *My Sporting Life* [Ashburton, U.K.: The Flyfisher's Classic Library, 2000], 1–8). Hayter was able to locate an anonymous history of Hills's battalion—"a slender sad little book" (4)—that offers only a partial history because such severe losses had been suffered "that by 1917 almost none of the original group of officers had survived to be able to contribute to the story" (4). Hills acquitted himself well in combat; Hayter identifies a report from 15–16 September 1916 that notes Hills "was as usual a perfect lion, and led the advance" (5).

37. Peter Hart, *The Somme: The Darkest Hour on the Western Front* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2008), 528. Hart breaks down the casualty figures for the battle: British 419,654; French 204,252; and German 450,000–600,000.

38. Hills, *My Sporting Life*, 100.

39. Woolf, *Diary*, vol. I, 163.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 170.

42. Woolf, *Letters*, vol. II, 257.

43. Ibid.

44. Hills, *A Summer on the Test* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1930), xiii. This is the definitive second edition, from which I have taken all quotes from this point forward.

45. John Waller Hills, *A History of Fly Fishing for Trout* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1921). Hills's motto, "la pêche est ma folie," can be translated as "fishing is my folly" or "fishing is my madness." The breadth of

Hills's scholarship is impressive, encompassing early French treatises from the fifteenth century to British and American texts 500 years later. He is particularly strong on angling poetry from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (John Dennys, Charles Cotton, Henry Wooten, John Gay), which he prefers to the prose from the same period. It appears he had access to the "great collection of fishing books formed by Alfred Denison" (13). Denison (1816–1887) was a leading nineteenth-century collector of early angling literature. His collection—which included a manuscript version of *A Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle*—remained intact until it was sold at auction at Sotheby's in July 1933.

46. Hills, *History*, 15.

47. Ibid., 197. Hills attributes this phrase to Sir Walter Scott.

48. Ibid., 64.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 61.

51. Ibid., 64.

52. Ibid.

53. Woolf, *Diary*, vol. I, 170. She also refers to Hills's "open air sagacity" (200).

54. William Lawson, quoted in Hills, *History*, 42.

55. Ibid., 43.

56. Ibid., 220.

57. Ibid., 136.

58. Ibid., 138.

59. John Waller Hills and Ianthe Dunbar, *The Golden River: Sport and Travel in Paraguay* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1922). Joseph Conrad's renowned novella *Heart of Darkness* was republished in 1921 in its final version. It remains the prototype of the tropical river journey to unknown headwaters, fraught with mystery and danger. In chapter XII, Hills tried his hand at this sort of atmospheric storytelling as he explored a forbidding tributary called the River of Misfortune.

60. Ianthe Dunbar was a travel writer and companion of Hills on his South American trip, along with her sister and an unnamed fellow fisherman. She wrote one other travel book, *The Edge of the Desert* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1923), about Tunisia, which she dedicated to Hills.

61. Hills, *Summer*, xi.

62. Hills, *Golden River*, 41–42.

63. Ibid., 40.

64. Ibid., 42.

65. In addition to his artistic career, Norman Wilkinson came to prominence during World War I when he invented camouflage paint designs to protect British ships from German submarines.

66. Hills, *Summer*, 144. See also Plate VIII.

67. Norman Wilkinson, letter to John Waller Hills, 10 October 1923, Duckworth-Hills Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

68. Hills, *Summer*, 1.

69. Notable later editions include printings from Geoffrey Bles Ltd. (1946), Barry Shurlock (1972), Andre Deutsch Ltd. (1983), the Flyfisher's Classic Library (1995), and Medlar Press (2016).

70. Hills, *My Sporting Life*, 138.

71. Hills, *Summer*, x.

72. "April is the cruellest month": the opening line of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, first published in book form September 1923 by Woolf's Hogarth Press.

73. Hills, *Summer*, 35.

74. Ibid., 36.

75. Ibid. In *My Sporting Life* (139–41), Hills did eventually recount all the horrendous details of the huge trout he lost on that April day in 1924.

76. Ibid., 44–45.

77. Ibid., 45.

78. Hills, *My Sporting Life*, 138–39.

79. Hills, *Summer*, 192.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid., 193.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid., 194.

84. Hills gives a detailed account of his years at the Houghton Club in chapters 12 and 13 of *My Sporting Life*, including full excerpts from his fishing journals. Hills's biography of William Lunn was published in 1934 under the title *River Keeper* (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd.). Lunn's remarkable ability to revive threatened mayfly populations would be useful today on many Hampshire waters.

85. According to Hills's preface, the second edition of *A Summer on the Test* was called for to satisfy demand for a less ambitious (and therefore less costly) edition in a bigger printing. The text of this edition was followed in all subsequent printings.

86. See Tony Hayter, "Introduction," *My Sporting Life*, 6. Hills died in late December 1938, shortly before the New Year's Honours, when he would have been named a baronet. On 9 February 1939, a formal announcement from 10 Downing Street confirmed, "The King has been pleased to approve that the dignity of a baronetcy of the United Kingdom be conferred upon Andrew Ashton Waller Hills, son of the late Major the Rt Hon John Waller Hills." The *Telegraph* (London: 10 February 1939) reported Mary Hills's response: "I am very much touched at the honour which has been bestowed upon us in recognition of my husband's life work. He was a very modest man by nature and I do not think he ever gave a thought to such a thing as a title. When he was very ill, about a week before he died, he received an intimation that his name would be submitted for the New Year's Honours, and he was tremendously grateful because he knew it would fall upon his son."

87. Woolf, *Letters*, vol. II, 257.

88. Biographical information about Mary Grace Ashton is scarce and sometimes inaccurate. The story of her "romance" with Hills was reported in the *New York Times* in June 1931, likely because of its May–December aspects ("M.P. to Marry Novelist: Major J. W. Hills, 64, to Take as His Bride Mary Grace Ashton, 22," *New York Times* [10 June 1931], 31). The report appears to be wrong in two respects: the title of her first novel was misidentified as *Shackles of the Free*, and her age at the date of publication was misstated as seventeen. In search of more information about Ashton, I discovered a blog dedicated to documenting lesser-known British, Irish, and American women writers from the early- to mid-twentieth century. According to the entry for Mary Grace Ashton, the first of her six novels was *Race*, published in England in 1927 and the United States in 1928. Ashton was born in August 1908, so that makes her either eighteen or nineteen when the book came out. *Shackles of the Free* was actually her second novel, published in 1928. See Ashton's brief biography on the "British and Irish Women Writers of Fiction 1910–1960 (A)" page at Furrowed Middlebrow (http://furrowedmiddlebrow.blogspot.com/2013/01/british-women-writers-of-fiction-1910.html); accessed 22 November 2024.

89. Hills, *My Sporting Life*, vi.

90. Ibid., 10–11.

91. Ibid., 10.

92. Ibid., 11.

93. Ibid., 41.

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid. The long fly rod is shown in the photograph of Hills fishing the River Eden in early October 1897. In her early diary, Woolf describes watching Hills fish the Eden and records the fact that they (likely Vanessa) took photos of one such occasion on 1 October 1897 (Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, 132). Vanessa's extensive collection of family photographs is held in the Tate Museum (London). When I provided the date and location, the museum kindly retrieved several pages of photos from Vanessa's earliest album (1897), and I was able to identify Hills via the initials beneath each print, in this case "J.W.H."

97. Ibid., 35.

98. Ibid., 36.

99. Virginia Woolf, "Fishing," in *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1947), 176–79.

100. The absence of any title reference for the book under review continues to befuddle readers. Recently a British scholar repeated the error that Woolf's review is about "J. W. Hills' classic fly-fishing guide, *A Summer on the Test*" (Emily Kneebone, *Oppian's Halieutica* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020], 1).

101. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: A Parallel Text* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1971), Book XII, ll.208–10, 475.

102. Woolf, "Fishing," 176.

103. Hills, *My Sporting Life*, 32, quoted in Woolf, "Fishing," 178–79.

104. Ibid., 88, 90, quoted in Woolf, "Fishing," 177. Woolf has taken liberties with the text here, reversing the order of Hills's quotations, then separating them with a deceptive ellipsis. The first sentence, ending at "varnished," is taken from page 90 of *My Sporting Life* with slight modifications. The second sentence comes two pages earlier, on 88.

105. David Profumo and Graham Swift, eds., Introduction, *The Magic Wheel: An Anthology of Fishing in Literature* (London: Picador, 1985), 1–19, 1. The editors noted with interest the way Hills "so fascinated Virginia Woolf" (12), but they never acknowledged the existence of *My Sporting Life* in their analysis of Woolf's review, possibly because the memoir had been so long out of print at the time.

106. Woolf, "Fishing," 177.

107. Hills, *My Sporting Life*, 37.

Remembering Flip Pallot

Jared Zissu

Flip Pallot in the closing scene of the film TIME *(2020) .*

The American Museum of Fly Fishing joins the angling community in celebrating the life of legendary guide, storyteller, and conservationist Flip Pallot who passed away on 26 August 2025. Few people have left such an indelible mark on the sport or inspired so many along the way. Flip, who served as a member of AMFF's advisory council, was the 2020 recipient of the museum's Izaak Walton Award, which recognized his lifetime of contributions to the sport of fly fishing and his role in introducing countless anglers to the wonders of the water. True to form, Flip accepted the award with humility and humor, reminding us that his life's work had always been about sharing stories, passing on traditions, and celebrating the natural world.

AMFF Digital Marketing Director Alex Ford recalls his time with Flip while producing the museum's 2020 film *TIME*:

> It was a bit surreal pulling up to a house in the woods at the back of a gated community in Mims, Florida, knocking on the door, and there's Flip Pallot. He invited us in and poured us a glass of rum as we planned out the next four days, which became four of the most fascinating days of my life. We shot the majority of the film in Flip's backyard—literally and figuratively—as we explored the waterways of his youth on the St. John's River and the marshlands around Mims via airboat. Flip cooked lunch for us most days and shared more stories off camera than on. By the end of the shoot, we had one of the most impactful films I've ever been a part of, yet it all seemed effortless and fun. Flip was the consummate professional—we didn't realize how many gems he had been sharing until the editing process. He will be missed by generations of anglers, and I count myself incredibly lucky to have spent time with him.

Writer and angler Paul Bruun—and fellow Walton Award recipient—first fished with Flip in the early 1970s and carried the memories of that day with him for more than half a century:

> On a bright and windy, hence muddy, day at Flamingo in Everglades National Park, aboard Flip's latest Challenger skiff, we caught many stories but very few fish. Fiberglass fly rods were improving, but I was still awed by Flip's effortless casts and exquisite loops. I remember watching that precisely propelled orange Scientific Anglers Air Cell Supreme line sail over Snake Bight's floating weed-paved shallows. Purposely snagging a flyful of weeds, he made the hooked grass magically disintegrate with a violently short, snappy roll cast. For more than fifty years I've loved repeating Flip's trick.

Flip Pallot's influence lives on in the rivers, marshes, and salt flats he loved, as well as in the countless anglers who learned from his wisdom, generosity, and joy on the water. In the words of Paul, "So long, Flip, from your thousands of friends, and bye for now!"

The Granger Registered Bamboo Fly Rod

Photos by Jim Schottenham

Wright & McGill Granger Registered Fly Rod, 1950. Gift of Paul Jennings. 2025.039.002.

The rod collection at the American Museum of Fly Fishing is nothing short of remarkable. With nearly 1,500 examples—ranging from early wooden rods to classic cane, fiberglass, and graphite—it represents the broad evolution of the fly rod and angling equipment. Despite its size, however, there are still significant rods that have eluded us since the museum began accepting donations in 1968. I'm pleased to report that we can now cross one rare example off that list: in July 2025, we acquired a Granger Registered bamboo fly rod.

For those unfamiliar with the Granger name, here's a brief history of the Denver-based rod company. Goodwin Granger began building bamboo fly rods in 1918, with his earliest national advertisements appearing in publications such as *American Angler* and *Forest and Stream* in 1919.[1] These ads targeted Western anglers accustomed to the large waters and high winds of the area. Nearly from the outset, Granger promoted his rods as ideal for tournament fly casting. Competing in his first national tournament in 1922, he quickly made an impression, scoring 99.6 percent in wet-fly accuracy and 98.13 percent in dry-fly accuracy, and earning similarly high marks in the bait-casting events.[2]

With his keen attention to detail and proven success in competition, Granger's rods gained popularity among serious anglers. As demand grew, he transitioned from handmade rods to machine production in the early 1920s, enlisting the help of Chicago-area mechanical engineer Robert Holding.[3] By 1929, Granger offered an impressive lineup of rods that could be configured into seventy-two variations, including both fly- and bait-casting rods. In the 1930s, his catalog began distinguishing models by quality, introducing names such as Premier, DeLuxe, and Favorite.

Goodwin Granger passed away in the fall of 1931 at the age of forty-two. The company continued under the leadership of Bill Phillipson, who had joined Granger in 1925 and steered it through the Great Depression and into World War II. After the war, in 1945, Phillipson attempted to purchase the company but the offer was declined.[4] In 1946, the Wright & McGill Rod Company, also based in Denver, began producing bamboo rods and by 1947 had leased the Granger Rod Company.[5]

Wright & McGill continued bamboo production until the early 1950s, ending with the 1954 catalog, which offered only fiberglass rods.[6]

Amid these transitions, Phillipson released what is now considered Granger's finest rod: the Granger Registered. First introduced in the 1939 catalog,[7] the Registered was a significant departure from other models in both design and craftsmanship. It featured chromium-plated hardware (including ferrules and reel-seat components), hand-finishing, and distinctive black guide wraps tipped with white (despite advertisements describing them as silver). Like the rods of the legendary Edmund Everett Garrison, the six cane strips used in each Registered rod were all taken from the same culm of bamboo—a mark of meticulous rod making.[8] The price for this outstanding rod reflected the quality, retailing for $100 in 1950.

Unique among Granger rods, the Registered also included a hook keeper just above the winding check. Each was shipped in a black cloth sock housed in a black enameled tube fitted with a nickel-silver identification plaque. The shaft bore the inscription "Granger Registered," along with a serial number indicating both the year of manufacture and the rod's place in the production sequence. This practice continued into the Wright & McGill era, although after the acquisition, some elements changed: "Wright & McGill" was added to the shaft, and the hardware shifted from chrome to nickel silver, including the patented Phillipson reel seat.

Each rod was also issued with a registration card, but according to Granger historians Dick Spurr and Michael Sinclair, neither Granger nor Wright & McGill retained these cards after the company ceased bamboo rod production in 1953.[9]

The museum's newly acquired rod is a model RX 9660, serial number 1950394—built in 1950 and representing the 394th rod out of fewer than 400 ever produced. It measures 9 feet, 6 inches and weighs 6 ounces, built in three sections with an extra tip, and it remains in its original bag and tube. With its richly toned cane and exceptional craftsmanship, it is not only a rare find but also a beautiful and historically significant addition to our permanent collection.

Jim Schottenham
Curator

ENDNOTES

1. Michael Sinclair, *Goodwin Granger: The Rod Man from Denver* (Paducah, Ky.: Michael's Bamboo Books, 2010), 22.
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Ibid., 61.
4. Dick Spurr and Michael Sinclair, *Colorado Classic Cane: A History of the Colorado Bamboo Rod Makers* (Grand Junction, Colo.: Centennial Publications, 1989), 55.
5. Ibid., 106.
6. Ibid., 123.
7. Sinclair, *Goodwin Granger*, 200.
8. Rod maker and historian Hoagy B. Carmichael shared this information during his presentation at the premiere of the Garrison/Carmichael exhibit of rods (9 August 2025) at the American Museum of Fly Fishing in Manchester, Vermont.
9. Spurr and Sinclair, *Colorado Classic Cane*, 4.

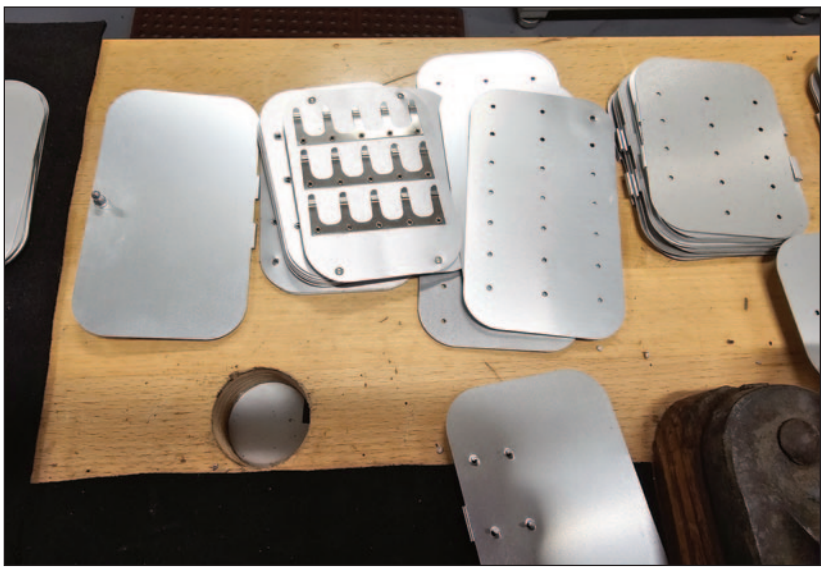
Original nickel-silver plaque.

Wright & McGill continued to use the Granger Registered name for this rod after leasing the Granger Rod Company in 1947.

Richard Wheatley of England

by John Mundt

John Mundt



Richard Wheatley of England components in the production queue.

Fly press. That was an angling term I hadn't heard before, but soon learned it wasn't one. As the spindle spun on the heavy industrial press, an aluminum blank took shape as a rectangular form that would eventually become an integral part of a finished Richard Wheatley fly box.

Wheatley is a name familiar to many who fly fish. Taking its place alongside other famed accoutrements of the sport, *Wheatley fly box* is rightly mentioned in the same breath as Orvis rod, Hardy reel, and Mustad hook. The histories of these famous manufacturers take us well back into the nineteenth century, with Mustad founded in 1832, Orvis in 1856, Richard Wheatley in 1860, and Hardy in 1872. All these storied manufacturers continue to produce fine tackle today.

Richard Wheatley was born in 1827 England during the reign of King George IV.* He started his career as a button maker and became a fishing-pocketbook apprentice at the age of seventeen. He went on to found his eponymous business in 1860, making fishing pocketbooks out of leather with pocket sections and parchment dividers. In the 1880s, Wheatley developed the first fly clip to hold eyed flies. The first tin boxes were made available commercially in 1890, and in 1900 aluminum was used as a new raw material. Richard Wheatley was one of the first English manufacturers to use this new noncorrosive metal, and a special satin finish was developed as their hallmark. In 1908 the first compartmented fly boxes were introduced, and subsequent designs incorporated transparent lids with spring latches.

Jim Schottenham

Wheatley fly box used by George Parker Holden, c. 1930s. Gift of Katherine M. Holden. 1980.021.004.

*Historical information about Richard Wheatley of England is gleaned from the Great Britain–based website https://richardwheatley.co.uk/pages/about-us.

Tawna Foth

Alan Gnann (left) assisting lead technician Chris Beebe with production of a Wheatley fly box on one of the original nineteenth-century Wheatley factory fly presses.

John Mundt

A Wheatley for every taste.

The original Sweeney & Blocksidge fly press shown above was manufactured in Birmingham, England, and is one of eight in regular use at REC Components in Stafford Springs, Connecticut, where Richard Wheatley of England–branded fly boxes are produced today. Those robust machines are mechanical marvels that continue to do what they were designed to do 100-plus years ago. Alan Gnann, president of REC Components, explained that when his firm acquired the Wheatley business and equipment, the manual operation of the fly presses was assisted by the counterweighting of British cannonballs to make rotation easier. Sadly, the cannonballs had to be left behind due to red-tape complexities concerning the export of "military equipment."

As modern tastes evolve, so have Richard Wheatley of England product offerings. They still offer their signature brushed-aluminum window-top boxes, as well as a wide variety of synthetic insert options and custom finishes made possible through anodizing, graphic application, and laser-engraving technologies.

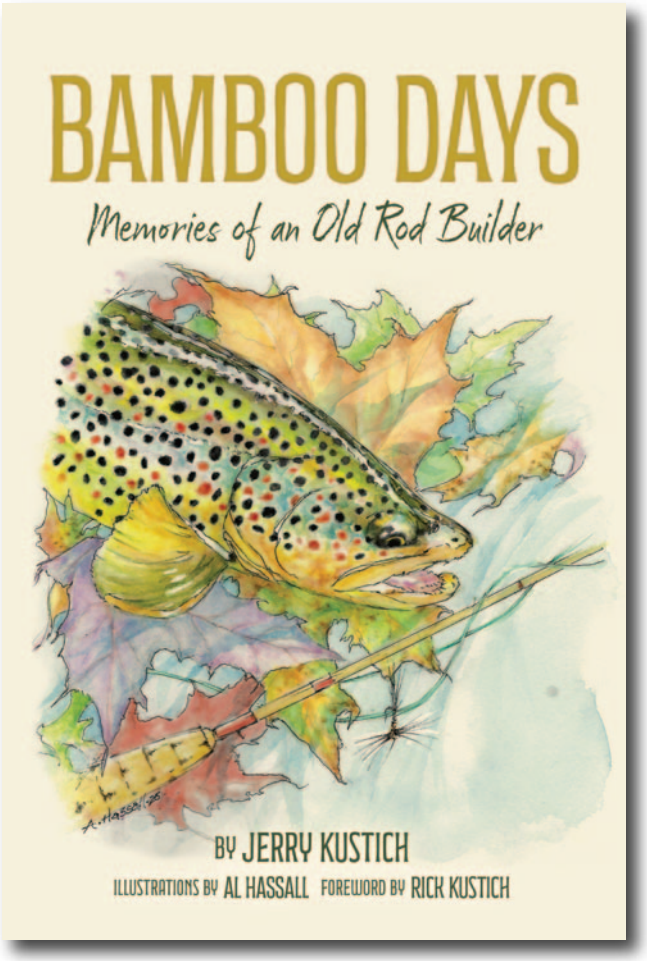
Alan Gnann and his team at REC are true Keepers of the Flame, and modern anglers can be grateful that they can head out to their favorite rivers toting flies in the same manner as those who cast a fly in the formative era of our sport. For more information on Richard Wheatley of England™ product offerings, visit www.rec.com.

John Mundt is a former trustee of the American Museum of Fly Fishing, and his vest holds several Wheatleys.

BOOK REVIEW

Jerry Kustich's *Bamboo Days*

by Rob Reid



Picture a fly angler standing in the estuary of a river and casting his imagination upstream. The river signifies the flow of time embodied in the full, rich life of Jerry Kustich. The four tributaries feeding into the river are his essay collections published since 2001: *Holy Water*, *Around the Next Bend*, *A Wisp in the Wind*, and *At the River's Edge*. He's wading now to mark the release in late November of *Bamboo Days*, published by West River Media. Subtitled *Memories of an Old Rod Builder*, his fifth and final book is equal parts summation, meditation, tribute, and celebration of an artful life.

As a memoir, the book contains new essays while revisiting material and themes examined in previous books, filtered through the understanding and sympathy of maturity. "With most of life now behind me," he writes in the introduction, "I have concluded that young age is for following one's dreams and old age is for reflecting on the dreams one followed" (2). A confluence of memory and imagination, *Bamboo Days* flows between past and present as Kustich casts to the current lines that have sustained him in good times and bad.

In contrast to many prominent literary angling authors—either professional writers who got hooked on fly fishing as a lifestyle with passports to the last good places or academics who sought respite from work obligations in the contemplative recreation—Kustich is a throwback to an earlier age. He came to writing by way of, and through, fly fishing as both inspiration and subject.

Izaak Walton famously declared fishing an art form. Kustich took the assertion to heart. *Bamboo Days* is an account of how he integrated the theory and practice of fly fishing into a life devoted to art as moral undertaking, whether building fly rods, drawing and making music (in the early days), or generously passing on his knowledge to others—all of which he expressed through elegant writing. In short, he is what he does; the man and the artist are inseparable, like a vintage rod and reel.

Kustich was born and raised on an island in the Niagara River. He left home at eighteen for seminary, where he remained for eight years. He headed west, first to Idaho where he built a cabin in the woods, became enamored with fly fishing, and married Debra, who died of ALS in 2009. Then he moved to Montana where he lived for many years and nurtured his fly-fishing passion in all its diverse dimensions. Finally, he lived briefly in Mexico before retiring to the upper Chesapeake Bay area of Maryland, where he now lives with his partner Sharon Mutch.

In many ways Kustich never left the seminary. When he writes about urgent, even dire, environmental issues, he's unapologetically preachy. Otherwise, he avoids proselytization, preferring the poetry of water to the dogma of the pulpit. He approaches all that matters to him through a spiritual ethos, which is reflected in his books. Fly fishing—which found Kustich as much as he found it—was a calling he answered with grace, devotion, and reverence.

As recounted in *Bamboo Days*, Kustich joined Glenn Brackett when he was overseeing the R. L. Winston Rod Company's bamboo rod department. They subsequently co-founded Sweetgrass Fly Rods in 2006. The shop incorporated ecological advocacy as part of its business plan.

Brackett began as a teacher and mentor to Kustich. Despite mastering the material components of fly fishing, Kustich's writing served as a constant reminder that the activity's essence transcended gear and tackle, method and technique. Eventually the two men became more than business partners; they were also angling companions and fellow craftsmen who adapted the New England arts and craft bamboo rod tradition pioneered by Hiram Leonard and Ed Payne. They grew into soul friends, known to the ancient Celts as *anam cara*.

Kustich is catholic in his angling tastes and predilections. Although his passion for fly fishing began with trout, he has fished fresh and salt water for black bass, steelhead, salmon, muskie, chain pickerel, striped bass, catfish, bonefish, and such exotics as snakehead, among other species—all with unfettered enthusiasm. He has fished around the clock, in all seasons and weather conditions, in streams, rivers, and lakes throughout America and beyond (including many parts of Canada, even Newfoundland). Not the least bit elitist, he has written love letters to his faithful Datsun pickup and reminisced about ice fishing by replaying the newsreel of childhood.

Although he preferred wading rivers above all other modes of angling, in later years Kustich took up kayak angling in response to creeping senescence. He recalls times when fishing got weird, scary, or otherwise defied the laws of logic and rationality. He recounts the thrill of success and the humiliation of failure that defines fly fishing—which makes it such a seductive metaphor for the vagaries and vicissitudes of life.

Like the most engaging angling memoirs, *Bamboo Days* is more than a fishing journal or instructional manual. Kustich doesn't view fly fishing as a separate, isolated activity, but as intricately and intrinsically braided into the fabric of life.

Kustich is a literate fly angler with a fine prose style, which is not surprising considering his praise of writers—he calls them heroes—who have guided him over the years. In return, he has been a tireless mentor and advocate of many fly anglers who dreamed of becoming published authors. The evidence lies in the acknowledgments and dedications that dimple their books like expanding rise rings.

The quality of Kustich's writing entices me to reread his lyrical descriptions as I encounter them in the essays. Here are a couple of passages from "The Gloaming" to prove my point: "As the ashen hues of twilight dissolve into the thick black of night, I have often felt engulfed by a web of peacefulness" (129–30). And "Watching and waiting in eager anticipation, a river comes to life as darkness descends" (130).

Rick Kustich

Jerry Kustich in Alaska on a fishing trip with his brother.

For me the most emotionally poignant element of *Bamboo Days* is its deep, rich patina of memento mori. This bittersweet quality enhances many of the sublime works in fly-fishing literature, from Walton and John Waller Hills through Hemingway and Maclean, to Harry Middleton and David James Duncan.

Kustich pays loving tribute to his late wife, acknowledging the heartbreaking loss followed by the piercing sorrow he carried for many years. Likewise, he pays homage to departed fly anglers. Some, like Scott Waldie and Norm Ziegler, were dear companions who fused fishing with writing. Others, while not close friends, touched him in meaningful ways, such as Cathy Beck and John Gierach, as they did the global fly-fishing community.

Now in his late seventies—his goal is to cast from his kayak into his eighties—Kustich stares down mutability and mortality with courage, humor, and wisdom. After all, fishing without regret is how grateful fly anglers remain forever young—at least in their own minds.

Bamboo Days is testament to a good life well lived and conscientiously examined. It delights readers who have accompanied Kustich through earlier books as he contemplated the manners and morals, aesthetics and metaphysics of fly fishing. Those reading him for the first time will be introduced to the joy and bliss, even rapture, that the activity so generously provides.

Robert Reid is a Canadian arts journalist who covered theatre, books and literature, acoustic music, and the visual arts for more than thirty years for newspapers across Ontario. He reviews books for Britain's Classic Angling *and is the author of* Casting into Mystery *(Porcupine's Quill, 2020), a fly-fishing memoir with a cultural twist. When he isn't tossing flies with bamboo rods on the water, he maintains websites at www.reidbetweenthelines.ca and www.castingintomystery.com.*

Bamboo Days: Memories of an Old Rod Builder
by Jerry Kustich
West River Media
201 pages
$26.95 (hardcover)
Available November 2025

Museum Wish List

The American Museum of Fly Fishing is actively seeking specific antique fly reels to enhance upcoming exhibits and strengthen our permanent collection. These additions will help enrich our educational displays, preserve the legacy of fly fishing, and fascinate collectors and enthusiasts.

Thanks to past Wish List contributions, we've successfully acquired several important artifacts, including:

- A selection of flies tied by Roy Steenrod
- An Albert Pettengill fly reel
- A Thomas Conroy rod fitted with a Gilbert Bailey reel seat
- Numerous flies from the family of Emile and Gene Letourneau

The reels listed below were all featured in Episode 7 of AMFF's Reel Talk (which can be viewed anytime at https://www.amff.org/webinars/):

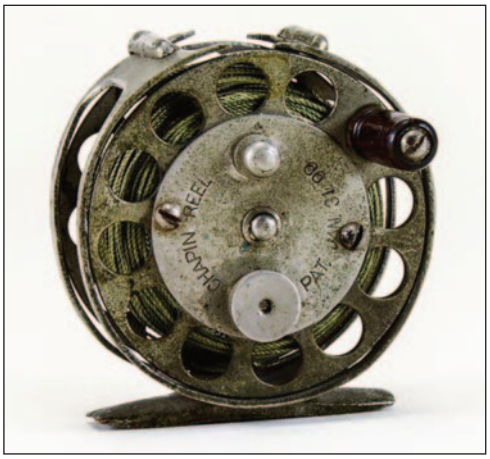
- Alround No. 50
- Anson Hatch Side-mount Reel
- Smith Patent/Barnum & Morehouse Automatic
- Andrew Chapin Patent Reel
- George Gates Patent Fly Reel
- Frederick Malleson Multiplying Fly Reel
- Frederick Skinner Archimedian
- Edward Vom Hofe Perfection Model 360

If you have any of the above items and would consider making a donation, please contact Curator Jim Schottenham via e-mail at jschottenham@amff.org or by calling (802) 362-3300. Thank you.

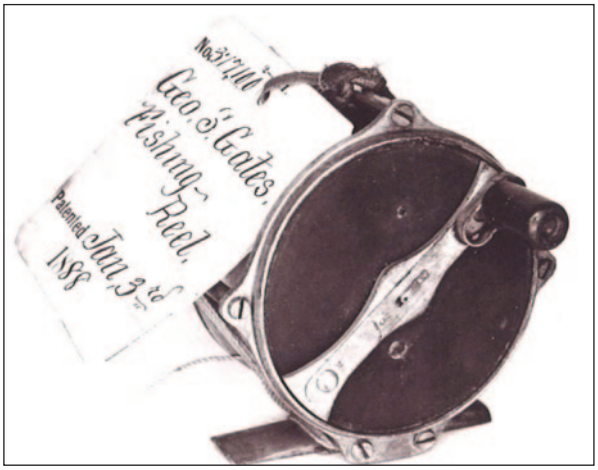
Based on the Andrew Hendryx patent of 1892, the little Alround No. 50 offered a lightweight design and line-drying capabilities. Photo courtesy of Steve Vernon.

The Anson Hatch patent reel of 1866 was just the second side-mount fly reel patented in the United States, manufactured by George W. Brown & Co. of Connecticut. Photo by Jim Schottenham.

The Smith Patent/Barnum & Morehouse Automatic reel was issued a patent in 1882 and likely was in production for only one year. With a simple exterior, it would be easy to overlook as a fishing reel. Photo courtesy of Lang's Auction.

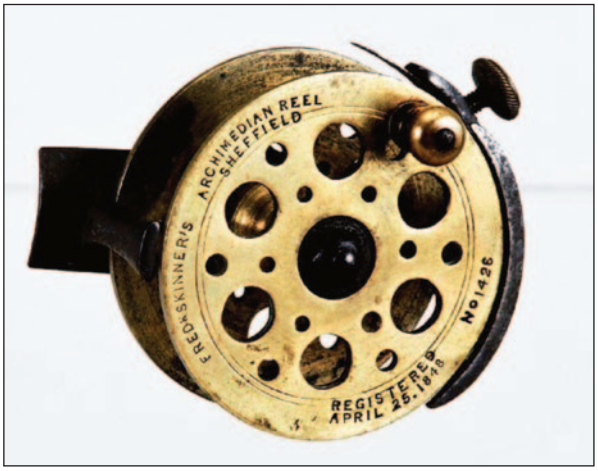


The 1899 reel patent issued to Andrew Chapin (Ferndale, California) was offered in two styles: one minus a frame and this example, with a "split-top" frame. Photo courtesy of Lang's Auction.



With its sliding handle, the George Gates reel of 1888 featured a clutch to prevent the handle grasp from spinning while a fish took line from the spool. Photo courtesy of Steve Vernon.

Frederick Malleson designed his patent multiplying reel in 1883, with a four-gear train tucked under a raised housing on the tail plate. It also featured a little arrow-shaped click switch. Photo by Nathan George.



The English "non-ornamental registered design" issued to Frederick Skinner of Sheffield in 1848 for his Archimedian reel likely influenced American reel makers William Billinghurst and Morgan James. Photo courtesy of Lang's Auction.

Regarded by many as the pinnacle of fly-reel design and functionality, the Edward Vom Hofe Perfection Model 360 fly reel was introduced in the 1890s and was last cataloged in 1942. Photo courtesy of Dean Smith.

Fly-Fishing Festival

Photos by Rick Griffith

Early visitors under the main tent.

A display of antique reels.

August 9 brought the eighteenth annual Fly-Fishing Festival to the museum grounds. Visitors enjoyed a growing community of vendors, including a few first-timers. As always, the festival featured artisans, angling professionals, and nonprofits for a day of learning and entertainment.

This years' fly tiers were Kelly Bedford, Scott Biron, George Butts, Mark Dysinger, AMFF Trustee Allen Rupp, and Mike Stewart. In what has become a highly anticipated festival tradition, Scott Biron and AMFF Curator Jim Schottenham led a joint demonstration on streamer tying for the crowd that was live streamed for angling fans at large. At the end of the demonstration, Biron was presented with the AMFF Volunteer of the Year Award (more about that on page 27).

Inside the museum we were delighted to host two former MLB players—Hall of Famer Jim Kaat and AMFF Trustee Jim Beattie—for a discussion of their shared love of fly fishing, how they got into the sport, and the parallels between baseball and fly fishing. Author and rod maker Hoagy B. Carmichael was also on hand to present our newest exhibit of Garrison rods.

As always, special appreciation goes to our sponsors and raffle donors: Bajio, Alan Bourgault, the Crooked Ram, Express Copy, Mulligans, Nature's Closet, NH Fly Tyer, Northshire Bookstore, Northshire Networks, Orvis, rk Miles, Rockwall Property Maintenance, Smuggler's Notch Distillery, Starbucks, Wagatha's, and the Works Bakery. Additional thanks to Shannon Roy for the gift of her music and to our delicious food and beverage vendors: Cut the Pie, Mount Holly Brewing, and Sexy Llama. And special thanks to Trustee Jamie Woods for spearheading the Manchester dinner event the night before, where fly-fishing enthusiasts and museum supporters gathered for barbecue, beer, and banter.

Thank you to those who supported the event and made this year's festival a success. The weather was beautiful, and the museum grounds were full. We couldn't have asked for a better day.

AMFF Ambassador Pete Kutzer puts a little body English behind a youngster's efforts in the casting competition.

Hoagy Carmichael discusses the rods in the museum's new Everett Garrison exhibition.

Sally Hespe reads Down by the River *by Andrew Weiner in the museum's gazebo during children's time with the Southwestern Vermont Chapter of Trout Unlimited.*

Mike Stewart tying a fly.

AMFF Trustee Jim Beattie (left) and MLB Hall of Famer Jim Kaat discuss fly fishing and baseball.

Casting on the back lawn.

AMFF Ambassador Scott Biron (left) and Curator Jim Schottenham conduct their streamer fly-tying webinar.

2025 Izaak Walton Award to Be Presented to Steve Huff

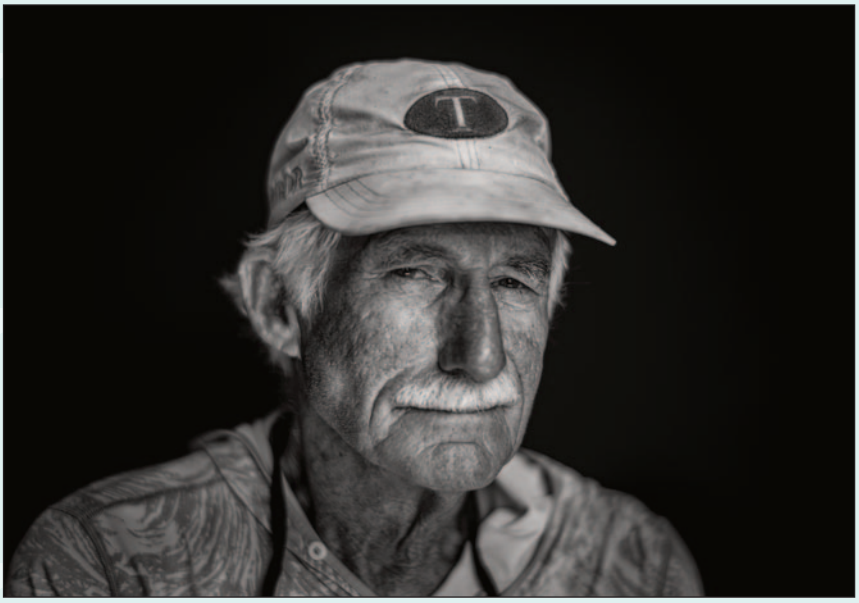


Photo courtesy of David Mangum

The American Museum of Fly Fishing (AMFF) is proud to announce that Steve Huff, a revered figure in the angling community and a pioneer in saltwater fly fishing, has been selected as the recipient of the 2025 Izaak Walton Award. This distinguished honor is presented annually to individuals who embody the legacy of conservation and sportsmanship espoused by Izaak Walton, author of *The Compleat Angler*.

For more than five decades, Steve Huff has set the gold standard in guiding, mentoring, and advocating for ethical angling practices. Widely regarded as one of the most accomplished and respected guides in the history of the sport, Huff has influenced generations of anglers and played a critical role in shaping modern saltwater fly fishing.

"Steve Huff is more than a legend—he's a cornerstone of our sport," said Gary Grant, president of the American Museum of Fly Fishing. "His unwavering dedication to conservation, his skill on the water, and his generosity in sharing knowledge make him an ideal recipient of the Izaak Walton Award."

The award will be presented at a special ceremony on Monday, **8 December 2025**, at the historic Key Largo Anglers Club in Key Largo, Florida. The evening will celebrate Huff's extraordinary contributions to fly fishing with friends, colleagues, and admirers from across the country in attendance, and will include a panel discussion featuring Paul Bruun, Chad Huff, Dustin Huff, Nathaniel Linville, Sandy Moret, and Jason Schratwieser.

The American Museum of Fly Fishing established the Izaak Walton Award in 2014 to honor and celebrate individuals who live by the *Compleat Angler* philosophy. Their passion for the sport of fly fishing and involvement in their angling community provides inspiration for others and promotes the legacy of leadership for future generations. Past recipients include luminaries Bob Popovics, Guido Rahr, Nancy Zakon, Paul Dixon, Flip Pallot, Tom Rosenbauer, Rachel Finn, Jim Klug, James Prosek, Tom Davidson, and Ed Jaworowski.

For more information, please contact amff@amff.org or visit https://www.amff.org/iwa-2025-huff.

Museum News

Scott Biron Receives Volunteer of the Year Award

By way of a surprise announcement at our Fly-Fishing Festival, the American Museum of Fly Fishing proudly recognized Scott Biron as our 2025 Volunteer of the Year. Scott is an ambassador for the museum in every way, sharing his knowledge, time, and passion to support our mission. Whether appearing in our webinars, offering tying instruction (including at our kid's clinics), assisting on collection acquisition trips, contributing articles to this journal, or representing the museum at local and regional industry events, Scott brings enthusiasm and generosity to everything he does.

Kathleen Achor

Volunteer of the Year Scott Biron at the Fly-Fishing Festival, where he tied flies, co-hosted a webinar about Warner's Winni Smelt, and accepted this award.

Upcoming Events

Events take place on the museum grounds in Manchester, Vermont, eastern time, unless otherwise noted.

October 18
Annual Members' Meeting
Leigh H. Perkins Gallery at AMFF
via Zoom
9:00 a.m.

December 8
Izaak Walton event honoring Steve Huff
Key Largo Anglers Club
Key Largo, Florida

December 11
Tackle Talk with Jim Schottenham
Episode 6 with Steve Woit
via Zoom
3:00 p.m.

January 23–25
The Fly Fishing Show
Edison, New Jersey

April 23
Heritage Award Event honoring Charles Gaines
New York Yacht Club
New York City

Always check our website (www.amff.org) for additions, updates, and more information or contact (802) 362-3300 or amff@amff.org. The museum's email newsletter offers up-to-date news and event information. To subscribe, look for the link on our website or contact the museum.

The Stream

You can now find all our recent collection features, archive highlights, podcasts, and more in one convenient place online: The Stream. You'll also find event recaps, webinar recordings, and the latest episode of Display Case, featuring Clifford Watson from Trout Unlimited. To learn more, visit www.amff.org/explore and enjoy everything there is to offer, all made freely available through the support of our members.

Recent Donations to the Collection

Wayne Ogden (Lincoln, Massachusetts) donated a 1960s Ted Williams fiberglass fly rod with its original case. **Jeff Hatton** (Paonia, Colorado) gave us one of his custom-built bamboo fly

rods with a wood form case and leather sheath. **Paul Jennings** (Pasadena, California) donated three bamboo fly rods for our permanent collection: an Edward Payne, a Granger Registered, and a Debell Midget.

Jim Uslan (Warthen, Georgia) contributed a large assortment of Super-Z rod ferrules fabricated by Louis Feierabend in the 1950s. Another 1950s artifact was sent to us by **Richard Landerman** (Sandy, Utah): a line dryer handmade by West Coast rod builder John Schneider.

Michael Iannuccillo, his brother **John Iannuccillo**, and **Bob Mallard** (San Francisco, California) donated a significant collection of carded Jim Warner streamer flies. **Pete Barrett** (Jupiter, Florida) gave us a selection of objects celebrating saltwater angling history, including ones commemorating Salt Water Fly Rodders of America, as well as flies tied by Al Brewster and Bob Boyle.

John Mundt (Simsbury, Connecticut) brought us a proof copy of the decree for the Anglers' Club of New York's Medal of Honor awarded to Joan Salvato Wulff in 2018. **Elisabeth Shewmaker** (Hanover, New Hampshire) donated four New Hampshire Atlantic salmon licensing stamps spanning 2000–2003, each framed with its corresponding fly. **Scott Biron** (New London, New Hampshire) gave us a humorous bumper sticker highlighting the obsession with Bogdan reels.

For our museum library, **William Menear** (Toronto, Ontario) donated multiple titles from his library, and author **Steve Woit** (Lexington, Massachusetts) shared a copy of his latest book, *Mary Orvis Marbury: A Life in Flies* (2025).

Sara Wilcox

AMFF was delighted to once again welcome children of all ages to our July Kids Clinics. Fly tying, arts and crafts, bug hunting, and casting were all on the activity menu over the course of the month, even when the weather forced us to bring the fun indoors. Many thanks to the volunteers, participants, and parents who made our 2025 Kids Clinics a success.

CONTRIBUTOR

Dee Chatani

Christopher Pibus grew up near the shores of the St. Lawrence River in Quebec, and he has been inspired and sustained by moving waters ever since. He is a writer and retired lawyer now living in Dundas, Ontario. His fly-fishing life began in 1970 when he spent two weeks camping in the woods near Wilmington Notch, fishing his beloved West Branch of the Ausable.

Chris studied English and American literature at McGill University, then completed a graduate degree in English and a law degree at the University of Toronto. He practiced intellectual property law for forty years before resurfacing to write fishing stories, including "Green Despair," which appeared in the Fall 2024 issue of this journal.

From the first time he fished the River Test in Hampshire, more than twenty-five years ago, Chris has been fascinated by the life and works of John Waller Hills. Since stumbling upon the connection between Hills and Virginia Woolf, he has been delighted to immerse himself in the rich literary and fly-fishing worlds of Edwardian England.

More Than a Sign

Sarah Foster

The museum's new sign honors our historic roots while looking ahead to a bright future. We extend our gratitude to Brendan Truscott for his thoughtful design work in bringing this vision to reality.

For many, the sign outside the American Museum of Fly Fishing, its golden carved fly central and striking, reflected the high standards of our physical exhibitions and the traditions from which we were built. Over the years, though, it had been slowly deteriorating: letters fading, paint wearing, wood splitting. This year it became clear that minor maintenance was no longer enough, and our sign needed to be replaced. There was much to consider: Do we recreate the same stately style? Should our logo be front and center? Getting it right was a must!

In keeping with the AMFF logo, a shield-shaped sign was created in our signature navy blue, with gold encircling the fly and our name in the updated font. With a nod to our history and founding, *Est. 1968* appears.

So, why is this important? Of all the things happening at the museum and in our industry, why have I dedicated this space to writing about our road sign? Well, to me it's a sign—both figuratively and literally—that AMFF is ready for the next chapter.

As we move swiftly through preparation for 2026 and broader strategic planning for the next several years, we will be asking ourselves whether our mission still reflects who we are and what we do, and what impact we want to have. We will dive into our vision statement and our core values to ensure that we are serving you—and our community at large—in relevant ways.

We are thrilled to develop a traveling exhibition schedule for *Reflections: The Angler and Nature in Art*, which will allow many more (and possibly unlikely) visitors to immerse themselves in the angler's experience and explore the ways sporting art has chronicled the ever-changing connections with nature. You can count on our new web page, The Stream, to satisfy all your historical fly-fishing cravings with a monthly drop of archived videos, articles, webinars, and more. For those who eagerly await the *American Fly Fisher* (that's you!), you may be glad to hear that we will also have a regular print column in *TROUT* magazine, bringing interesting bits of fly-fishing history to their vast readership. We've found success in, and will continue to bring the fun to, our raffle program, which we'll kick off with another iteration of the road trip raffle—but not before you have a chance to win a Morgan James reproduction reel package this fall.

Last but not least, 2026 will bring big changes to the Vermont campus. If you've been waiting for an excuse to plan a trip to the museum, here it is! In August we will open a comprehensive exhibit in our Leigh H. Perkins Gallery on the history of fly fishing, highlighting four pillars: rods, reels, flies, and people. This display will chronicle some of the most significant and sometimes unknown moments in our sports history.

I hope you too can feel the excitement that this new sign brings!

Sarah Foster
Executive Director

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