

Frederick Rea

Reminiscences of a Hebridean Schoolmaster, 1890-1913 is a fascinating glimpse into life on South Uist during the late Victorian period. Its author F.G. Rea learnt to fish while on the island and, like many before and since, became mildly obsessed with tapping the riches of the fishing there.

Cross-country trout

One Saturday afternoon I happened to be at Lochboisdale pier when I met Duncan, the hotel keeper's son, with his fishing rod. I accompanied him to a neighbouring loch and watched him casting. Nothing happened for a time; then there was a swirl in the water; he struck and hooked a fish which had taken his tail-fly. After a few rushes and runs the fish was netted and landed – a nice five-pound fish. Duncan killed it with a blow on the head. He was then about to remove the hook from where it had caught in the fish's lip, when we saw a broken cast of three flies was hanging from the side of its mouth. 'Greedy beggar!' was Duncan's comment.

Returning to the hotel we found that parties of anglers had returned and were laying out their respective 'catches' on the grass in front of the hotel, and were comparing them. We told them of the fish we had caught and of the broken cast. Much surprise was shown and one of them said, 'One fish broke me and got away with the cast. But it could not be the same fish for it was on Loch K – – –, and that is quite eight miles away?' Then one of the other anglers asked whether he remembered what flies he had on the cast at the time. Quite readily he gave them: march brown, teal and green, and zulu. Duncan went indoors, then returned with the cast. This examination convinces us that it came from the identical fish that had been hooked earlier in the day. It must have travelled for miles through a chain of lochs only to be killed eventually near the sea in the evening of the same day.

Cross the stream on their backs

As the weather was fine Craig proposed to me that we should walk home along the 'machair', and the proposal met with my immediate acceptance

for the summer beauty of the beflowered shore-lands was then at its fullest. . . . Some two miles had been covered when Craig, who was a short way ahead, stopped and stood looking downwards, at the same time giving to us a low call 'Come here'. Quietly hastening to his side we found that he was looking intently into a stream that was running towards the sea, and directly across our path. The stream was about six or seven feet in width and running in a clean-cut channel across the 'machair'. At first I did not see what he was gazing at; then I became aware that hundreds and hundreds of trout were rushing inland up the stream; they were so closely packed that the water seemed scarcely sufficient to contain them. We all stood silently watching them as they sped past us at our feet: all sizes of fish from a foot to three or four feet in length were hurrying madly upstream: so thick were they in the water that even the big fish seemed to find difficulty getting past their smaller brethren and, by sheer strength and their weight, they forced their way through the packs of speeding fish.

We stood watching them for nearly an hour, and still then the stream was packed as full of them – there must have been thousands of them – I remember remarking to my companions: 'We could almost walk across the stream on their backs!' Craig, at last, gave a deep breath and said in a voice full of feeling: 'Well, boy and man I have fished the eastern rivers of Scotland, from the Ythan to the Tweed, but I have never seen such a sight as this before.' Alasdair told us that this stream was an effluent of the Howmore River and these waters were strictly watched and preserved for the sport of the proprietor and his friends. He had often seen the trout ascending the stream, but he had never seen them in such numbers before. Here we had to part with our friend; so, giving one last look at the fish we so much coveted, we each stepped back a few paces, took a run forward and leapt the stream. Not trusting ourselves to look into it again we waved to Alasdair and resumed our way homeward.

The Monster Trout

On inquiring from our friend of the inn, we were assured that the report about the monster trout was true. It sometimes had been hooked, so it was alleged, but had got away each time. Moreover it was said to have seized young ducks swimming on the loch waters.

Ascertaining from our host the situation of this loch we proceeded on our quest for it. Crossing over moorland we came to a cluster of crofters' houses, and situated right in the midst of them lay a small loch. It was evidently the one indicated by our friend; but it looked so small and insignificant that we much doubted the story of the fish we had heard. A man came out from a cottage door and Craig called out, 'Are there any fish in this loch?' The answer was 'Aye, but they are verra seldom.' We were soon carefully casting, and we methodically fished the whole of the water. The loch was so small that we thrice covered its surface in very short time, and though it was favourable weather for fishing, no sign of fish did we see. We left the loch with an impression of our having been 'taken in' by 'another fishing story'.

On several subsequent occasions, when my friend visited me, we fished this loch without obtaining any evidence of there being a fish in it. When on my way to other lochs lying south of the schoolhouse (*in Garrynamonie, south of Daliburgh*), I usually made a detour so as to make a few casts over the waters of this little loch, ever hopeful of getting a response as a reward for my perseverance. Fish life there always seemed to be non-existent, till one Saturday morning! As usual I had made my detour to the loch, rather as a matter of habit than with any expectation of a rise as I sent my flies out over the water. They fell lightly; there was a movement in the water and something had taken the middle fly off my cast! I struck, but the line met with a dead resistance and not a movement! At first I thought that the hook must be fixed into some inanimate object such as an old boot or a log. I tugged and pulled without response. Then the object (whatever it was beneath the surface I could not decide) began to move. There was no rush or plunge of a fish, but there was an irresistible force taking my steady gliding taut line through the water. I felt joy and pride for I did not doubt that I had hooked

the monster trout! At the west end of the loch there were some bulrushes, and I began to fear the fish getting among them; so I gave him the butt of the rod and put on the utmost weight and pressure I dare. This made no impression whatever upon him! The fish's steady glide simply continued, up and down the loch, across it and back again; backwards and forwards it went at just the steady rate. For all the effect of my rod's pressure on him he might have been a sack of coal instead of a fish. I had met my master, and I now began to have the feeling that he was playing with me, and that he was amused at my efforts to disturb his imperturbability or to bring him to the water's surface – I was helpless against him! Suddenly as though weary with the game he had been playing, he stopped. Then he swam direct for the rushes at the end of the loch. Frantically I tugged, jerked and pulled with both hands; but I might as well have been trying to stop a horse! Without deviating in the least from his course, he headed directly into the bulrushed water. There my line became stationary. After my pulling very hard, it came away, was reeled in but minus the flies! My feelings may be better imagined than expressed as I ruefully gazed at the waters before me. During the whole of the time – (I was going to say 'that I was playing the fish' but, perhaps, 'that the fish was playing with me' would be more appropriate) – not a glimpse of the fish did I get, not even a fin; nor was there any swirl of water as the fish calmly turned in its course. I, and many others afterwards essayed to catch this 'demon trout'; but, as far as I learned, no one ever met with success.