

A BATTLE OF WORDS

In Which "Zebedee" Treads on "Thid" With Both Feet

In a recent issue, "Thid" contended that mountaineers and yachtsmen are the only sportsmen who show any real imagination in the language with which they describe their sports. He was particularly critical of anglers. Another contributor, "Zebedee," joins issue with him in the following article:

OUR good friend "Thid" has been trailing his coat again — and so provocatively that this time I simply have to tread on it with both feet. With one because he hasn't made out anything like a case for the words and music of mountaineering, with the other because he has had the temerity to heap contumely on the one sport which above all others has enriched our language and our literature.

I take it that "Thid" is a mountaineer, yet what has he offered us of the music of the mountains? Stargazer and Moonraker or even the soft dove's music of Tutoko, what are these but tinkling cymbals beside the sounding brass of Aconcagua, Sorata and Chimborazo? I make no apologies for going afield for such music, for "Thid" had only three Maori names to quote and "Thid" should know what he is writing about. But let us go further. Can one compare Jagged, Red Peak, North and Couloir with Cruachan, Sgurr Dearg, Wyvis, and Schiehallion?

I will grant that there is music in the mountains, but rarely is it of the mountaineer's making, and where mountaineers have had the naming of the peaks there are so many Blimits as there are Moonrakers; and Otago, which has Aspiring, includes at least one other top which is not likely to appear in print, even in these enlightened days.

"Mountaineers have Failed Miserably"

No, mountaineers as a class have failed miserably to justify their existence, literally speaking. What has been written by mountaineers that will live? Many delightful books have been written about mountaineering, from Whymper's "Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus" down to the latest Everest pot-boiler, but is there one among them that is more than just "delightful"? If there is, I have yet to read it.

No doubt much verse has been written about the joys of climbing, but how much of it has been poetry? I can recall but two short pieces. The one entitled "Romance," by W. J. Turner, which begins:

*When I was but thirteen or so,
I went into a golden land,
Chimborazo, Cotopaxi
Took me by the hand.*

*My father died, my brother too,
They passed like fleeting dreams,
I stood where Popocatepetl
In the sunlight gleams. . . .*

. . . and the other, more modern and less magical, Geoffrey Winthrop Young's "The Cragsman":

*In this short span
Between my finger-tips on the smooth
edge
And these tense feet cramped to the
crystal ledge
I hold the life of man.
Consciously I embrace
Arched from the mountain rock on
which I stand
To the firm limit of my lifted hand
The front of time and space. . . .*

Why are there not more? Surely it is that mountaineering is artistic in theory alone. Functionally, it is a drearily scientific business and the boy who walked with shining Popocatepetl must sell his soul's vision for a mess of pottage (or pemmican) before he can reach its summit. For what music is there in the mechanics of mountaineering? What is a couloir but a corridor and who can find romance in seracs when he remembers that a serac is only a kind of Swiss cheese? More, the cacophony of cramp-ons, alpenstocks and parkas howls higher than Everest itself, and even that is preferable to talk of calories and vitamins. Mountaineers may have the vision splendid, but they cannot write about it.

Contrast with Anglers

In what magnificent contrast stands the angler, heir to a greater literary tradition than any other sportsman . . . who but "Thid" would say he is unlucky? His literature goes back to Homer and Virgil; Walton and Cotton mark his Renaissance with the only classic which sport has given the world; Dryden, Drayton, Pope, Addison, James Thomson, Kingsley, R. L. Stevenson, Rupert Brooke, and a host of others have worshipped at the same shrines. Even the famous remark attributed to Dr. Johnson was qualified. "Float-fishing," he said (it is said), "I can only compare to a stick and a string, with a worm at one end and a fool at the other." But he added, "Fly-fishing may be a very pleasant amusement."

I know that when I talk of angling many readers will shrug their shoulders just as "Thid" is inclined to do, and think they know all about it from the articles which that elderly reprobate "Irideus" has been smuggling into *The Listener*. But "Irideus" trafficks solely in the darker aspects of angling (largely, I should imagine, to keep the rivers as far as possible to himself and his pal, Gaffem) and there are few sports which have not their seamy, or come-up-and-see-me side.

Rods and Flies

Our good "Thid" would damn angling because, rod, reel, and line are not euphonious words. As justly might I damn mountaineering be-

cause vacuum-kettle, aneroid and ice-axe grate on the ear. But a rod is not a rod to an angler, it is a "Makakahi" or a "Restigouche." I give these as examples of the type of name used. For the most part such are trade-names and to mention them would be to advertise, which I must avoid. But, for that matter, what other sport encourages poetry in the prosaic business of advertising?

And the flies that the angler fishes with: Thunder and Lightning, Dusty Miller, Silver Doctor, Blue Dun, and Coch-y-bondhu. Is there not poetry there? And if we must admit to a trifle of black and red called the Bloody Butcher, we have that airy jewel of brown, green, gold, and the velvet of a blackbird's wing which we call Greenwell's Glory. Even the more mechanical contrivances among the lures are graced by good names and surely it was a poet who called a metal spinner a Golden Devon. And if you want to buy a loaded stick to dispatch your fish, you must ask for a priest.

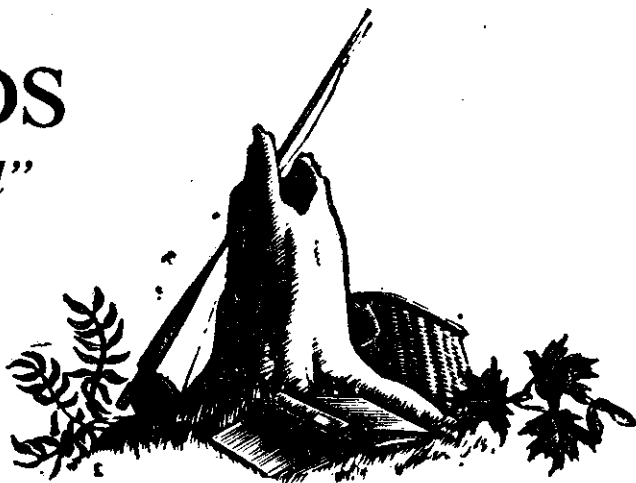
Poems for Anglers

Anglers have, largely, wrought their own vocabulary and fashioned it to endure. This delight in the sound and rhythm of words is peculiar to angling, so much, indeed, that a member of the Fly-Fishers' Club was once carried away by his enthusiasm into what he called a "Gallop of False Analogies":

*There is a fine stuffed Chavender,
A chavender or chub,
Which decks the rural pavender,
The pavender or pub
Wherein I take my gravender,
My gravender or grub. . . .*

Of course, I do not put that forward as an example of poesy. For that we must turn to, say, Rupert Brooke's "Heaven":

*Oh! Never fly conceals a hook,
Fish say, in the Eternal Brook,
But more than mundane weeds are
there,
And mud, celestially fair;
Fat caterpillars drift around,
And Paradisal grubs are found;
Unfading moths, immortal flies,
And the worm that never dies.
And in that Heaven of all their wish,
There shall be no more land, say fish.*



There is humour, and I venture to suggest, some poetry there, as there is in the prose of Harry Plunkett Greene, who wrote "Where the Bright Waters Meet," or that of the American Walton, Dr. Henry van Dyke, whose prose is as limpid and as fresh as the waters in which he fished so long.

Philosophy, Too

And where there is poetry there is philosophy. It would be strange if the philosophy of the angler were other than . . . well, the only word that fits it is philosophic!

Take Robert Bell's "The Trout":

*He hangs, a scimitar of light,
Miraculously in our sight,
Giving one moment to observe
His brief but agitated curve.*

*And so we work and dance the gay
Parabola of Life away,
And find the waters cool and deep
After that strange and frantic leap.*

I could go on quoting for hours, but two more will suffice. One is from the works of that sturdy old classicist, Andrew Lang, who gave us the well-known sonnet which speaks of the "Surge and Thunder of the Odyssey." Hear him:

*Within the streams, Pausanias saith,
That down Cocytus valley flow,
Girdling the gray domain of Death
The spectral fishes come and go;
The ghosts of trout flit to and fro.
Persephone, fulfil my wish;
And grant that in the shades below
My ghost may land the ghosts of fish.*

Last in this brief tale of words and music we have another short piece by Robert Bell, from his "Afterthoughts" — fatalistic, perhaps, but still, I think, poetry. It is called "The Fisherman":

*Beside the turbid stream of life
Sits the grim fisherman, who plies
His rod above the troubled strife,
Patient and watchful, nor denies
Any by reason of its size.*

*And I, too, on some careless day,
Shall feel the hook I had not
guessed;
And I shall try to break away,
And go, after a brief protest,
Into the basket, with the rest.*