



In The Beginning-Part IV - The Well Read Fly Fisherman

By Slapout Mike

I have written about fishing books before on this forum. I love to read about the history of fly fishing, the great stories about fly fishing pioneers, evangelists and technologists in our sport as well as new techniques and exciting new target species and locales. I find that my fly fishing library is just as important to me as all the time I spend at the vise tying flies or on the water casting the long rod, but I struggled in the writing of this piece until I read the following the other night before bed.

Now about books; you don't learn fishing from a book—you learn it from a fish. But books help you by interpreting what the fish is trying to tell you. However, you can't learn from one book, even this very good one; read every fishing book, good or bad, that you can get hold of. Put them all in together and let them eat each other up. You'll end by realizing that a book is just a reflection of one man's mind and personality, and there is tremendous difference in men; that there are a lot of different ways of doing the same thing, some of all of them may be right; and that there is more than one side to every question. In the end you must draw your own conclusions on the basis of your own experience. This will give you perspective, and perspective is the handmaiden of judgment.

There is another reason for reading all the books, the curious one that no matter how trivial, worthless, or even wrong a book may be, you can almost always find in it some one thing that you won't find in any other. Usually that marks the point where the author stopped repeating what other writers before him had said, and dipped into his own experience to record something he had observed himself.

Sparse Gray Hackle, from the Forward to Simplified Fly Fishing, S. R. Slaymaker, 1969

If there ever was Sage Advice, the above is it. I suspect in 1969, three years out of high school and in my first full year in the USAF, I had a dozen books in my fishing library. I was a bit disappointed the other day when a young member of this group told me there was only one fly fishing book in his library so I hope this little essay encourages him and others to expand their reading on fly fishing.

I was reading about the sport constantly as I learned to fly fish and honed my fishing, fly tying and rod-building skills. My personal library today is approaching 400 titles and there will be many more to come. Building and enjoying your own fly fishing library, like building any library just requires buying books, caring for and reading them. The sport of fly fishing has a rich history and the literature devoted to the sport is extensive and varied. There are way too many books for anyone to own or read them all. When I started this essay, I thought I'd list a few of my favorite titles, however, that task, along with Sparse's advice makes that too difficult. Every book and title out there is one you should read. I am going to list a few Fly Fishing History titles as they tend to be a bit obscure, but incredibly important reading, because they highlight many of the really important works by other authors.





Fly Fishing History-The history of fly fishing is actually very instructive on evolution of techniques, equipment and the culture of the sport. When the new killer fly or specific technique is touted in the fly fishing press or new book one only has to be familiar with the history of the sport to realize that nothing is really new, just slightly different.

The Fly—2000 Years of Fly Fishing History, Dr. Andrew Herd (2001)

This is not a quick read, but indeed an enjoyable one. If you ever wanted to know about the real history of fly fishing (at least as Dr. Herd understands it today), this is the book you need to read. This one does the best job of laying out the evolution of flies, materials, techniques and equipment as well as doing a marvelous job of characterizing the personalities involved. It clears up a lot of common misconception about fly fishing. If you have any interest in the evolution of our sport, this book is a must read.

A Concise History of Fly Fishing, Glenn Law (1995)

This is the equivalent of Fly Fishing History for Dummies. Very well written and easy to read in a day or so. Highly recommended.

American Fly Fishing-A History, (1995) and *Cowboy Trout* (2006), and *The Rise* (2006) and *Royal Coachman* (1999), Paul Schullery

If you were going to read just one book on the history of fly fishing, *The History of American Fly Fishing* should be it. Schullery is not only an accomplished historian, his writing is outstanding, his experiences vast and his insights marvelous. He’s an author you should read and have in your library.

The Joys of Trout (1973) and *The Fishing in Print* (1974), Arnold Gingrich

Gingrich was not only an avid fly fisherman; he was the founding publisher of *Esquire* magazine. Not only is his writing wonderful to read, his connection with fly fishing luminaries is legend and well represented in these titles. These two books are classics focused on surveying the literature and personalities of the sport. Every major angling literature collection contains these titles.

A History of Fly Fishing For Trout John Waller Hills, (1921)

This is probably the first really academic attempt to chronicle the history of fly fishing.

Some Links To Fly Fishing Libraries, Book Sources and Bibliographies-There are a literally 100’s of titles on fly fishing. There are a great many from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries that most readers are totally unaware of. Even if titles are out-of-print, actually obtaining vintage and reading out-of-print titles in their original, first edition form is an exciting part about having a fly fishing library. Every used book you obtain was probably some other fly fisherman’s favorite title. So knowing where you might find them to read or buy is useful. I’ve have found a few bibliographies devoted to fly fishing that provide useful insights to the literature important to the sport. Additionally, many books published before 1923 are now in the public domain and available in PDF form online. Whatever title you seek, new or used, there is a way to find them.

American Museum of Fly Fishing-Manchester, Vermont

The museum’s library ranks as one of the largest public collections of fly-fishing books in America. Although I’ve never visited the museum, it is near the top of my places to





visit in my autumn years. [American Museum of Fly Fishing](#)

Wikipedia’s Annotated Bibliography of Fly Fishing

This is a comprehensive bibliography that is growing all the time. [Wikipedia - Annotated Bibliography of Fly Fishing](#)

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Founded in 1996 originally as The Advanced Book Exchange, today, thousands of independent booksellers are listing millions of books on AbeBooks’ network of websites. AbeBooks is the world’s largest online marketplace for new and used books, and offers the greatest selection of books found anywhere. When I need an out of print title, I find it at [Antiquarian Book Exchange](#).

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Take Care of Your Library

Should you take the plunge and attempt to begin building your fly fishing library with some of the above selections or other vintage titles, you quickly find out that some of these books can be expensive. Like anything else, as supply goes down and demand up, prices follow. I made mistakes in caring for many of my early fly fishing book acquisitions—I was young and ignorant of the future value these books might have. I wrote my name in various places with the wrong kind of inks. I didn’t protect dusk jackets from tears or fading from exposure to bright sunlight. I didn’t always handle books carefully when pulling them off or putting them on bookshelves—thus damaging dust covers and bindings. In the late 1960s and early 1970s I acquired many of my fly fishing titles as a member of the Outdoor Life Book club. I carried these titles around the world during my U. S. Air Force career from 1968 until the mid-90s. Although I never stopped acquiring titles it was in the early 1990s that I seriously began to evaluate the books I had, wanted and needed to expand my Fly Fishing library. I found that some 1st Edition titles I obtained for less than \$10 from the book club early on, were now highly sought after, scarce and valuable titles. However, as with any collectable, value is influenced significantly by condition and many of my books weren’t as sound as they could have been, and thus a valuable had I taken better care of them! The lesson here, again from the school of hard knocks, is this: A new book purchased today, may indeed turn out to be a scarce and valuable title many years from now and you just can’t predict which ones they will be. If from the onset, you take care of your books with dust jacket covers, proper lighting and handling; you or your heirs may realize a much greater value from your library in the future and you will be showing respect to the literature of one of the greatest pastimes in the world.

Take the advice of Sparse Gray Hackle and read every Fly Fishing book you can put your hands on. There has been many 100s of new titles written since he wrote those words in 1969. Every year there will be more. The well-read fly fisherman will read every new one and every old one he can. And as Sparse says, he will be a better fly fisherman for doing so.

