

'A BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN PAEAN TO SCOTTISH FISHING'
RICHARD BATH, *SCOTTISH FIELD*

THE SILVER INVICTA

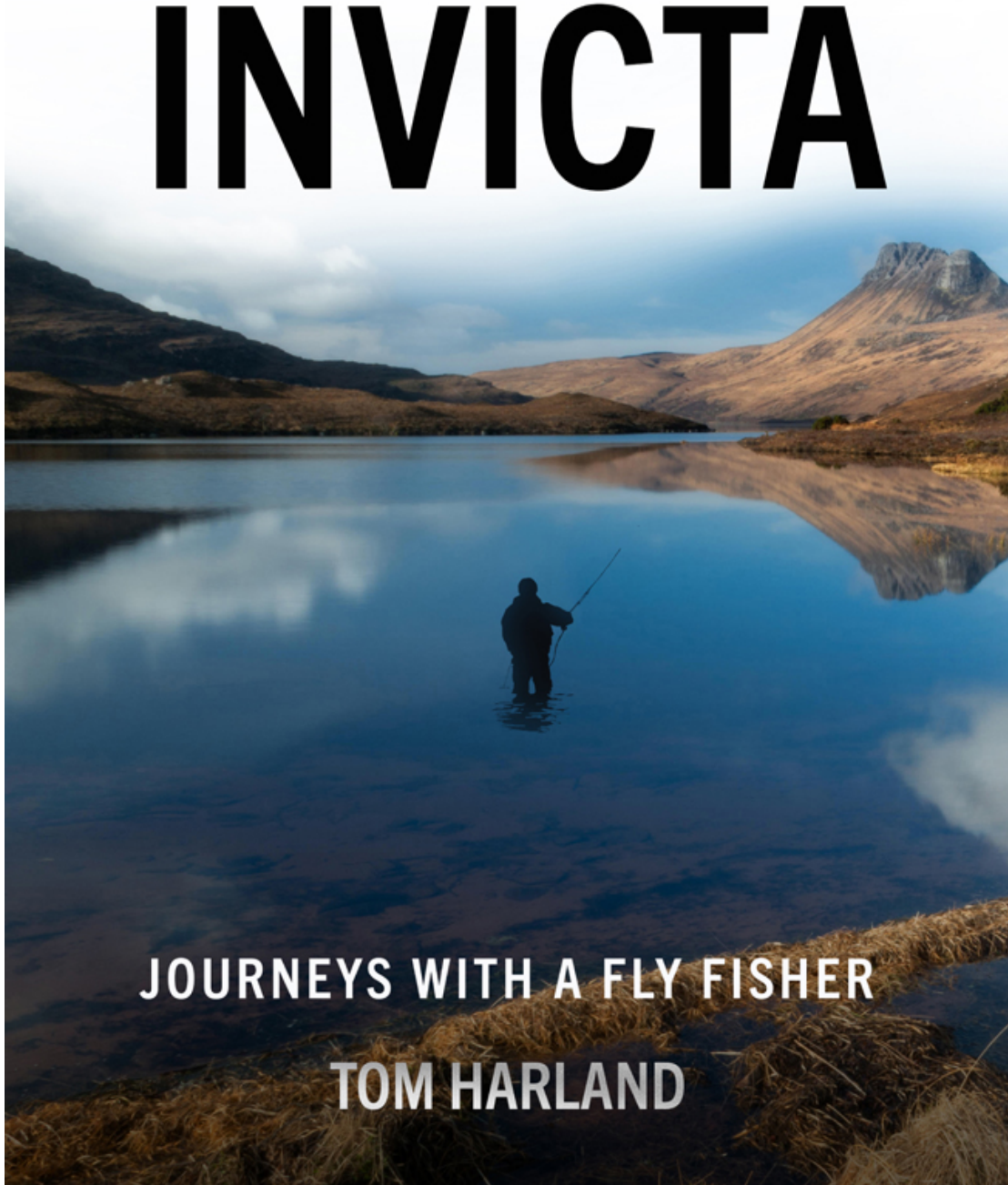
JOURNEYS WITH A FLY FISHER
TOM HARLAND

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**THE
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‘Tom Harland is the sort of fishing author I like: self-deprecating, funny, flawed and the sort of guy in whose company you instinctively know you’d enjoy sinking a few post-fishing pints. *The Silver Invicta: Journeys With A Fly-Fisher* is a beautifully written paean to Scottish fishing in which Harland moves seamlessly between the two great pescatarian loves of his life: the Queen of salmon rivers, the Tweed, and the more ascetic delights to be had in tracking wild brown trout on the achingly beautiful moonscape of Assynt. His great trick is to be able to infuse both experiences with an infectious character that draws you in and quietly demands your attention. The greatest compliment you could pay this book is that non-anglers would enjoy it every bit as much as dyed-in-the-wood fishers.’

RICHARD BATH
SCOTTISH FIELD

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TOM HARLAND

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ONE: [THE EARLY BIRD](#)

TWO: [BIRTH OF A FISHER](#)

THREE: [A ONE-CAST EVENING](#)

FOUR: [WELCOME FLAT](#)

FIVE: [KELSO ANGLING ASSOCIATION, LIKE YE KEN](#)

SIX: [IN PRAISE OF THE KELLY KETTLE](#)

SEVEN: [ASSYNT](#)

EIGHT: [THE BACK-END](#)

NINE: [FINSBAY, ISLE OF HARRIS](#)

TEN: [THE BUDGET GUIDE TO SALMON FISHING IN SCOTLAND](#)

ELEVEN: [THE SOLDIER'S LEAP AND OTHER 'ONES THAT GOT AWAY'](#)

TWELVE: [THE SILVER INVICTA](#)

THIRTEEN: [THE SOUTH UIST SHAMBLES](#)

FOURTEEN: [A RAINBOW ON THE BROKEN RIVER](#)

FIFTEEN: [THE POOR HOUSE AND THE NAVER](#)

SIXTEEN: [WINTER](#)

SEVENTEEN: [BLACK RIDERS OVER LOCH OSSIAN](#)

EIGHTEEN: [RENEWAL](#)

NINETEEN: [A NIGHT IN THE SOUTHERN UPLANDS](#)

TWENTY: [DURNESS LIMESTONE](#)

TWENTY-ONE: [IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GAVIN MAXWELL](#)

TWENTY-TWO: [IN THE BACKCOUNTRY](#)

TWENTY-THREE: [THE PATERNITY-LEAVE TROUT](#)

TWENTY-FOUR: [THE UPPER TEES AND THE ORANGE PARTRIDGE](#)

TWENTY-FIVE: [W.C. STEWART'S SPIDER](#)

TWENTY-SIX: [RETURN TO ASSYNT](#)

TWENTY-SEVEN: [THE LOCH OF THE GREEN CORRIE](#)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- The 'Gillaroo Loch', Assynt. *Frank Burkitt*
Climbing to the Loch of the Green Corrie, Assynt, with Quinag in the background. *Frank Burkitt*
Badentarbat pier, Coigach. *K. Harland*
Suilven from Suileag Bothy. *Tom Harland*
Rainbow over Loch Oscaig, looking towards Inverpolly. *Tom Harland*
K fishing the Copland River (New Zealand) with a broken rod. *Tom Harland*
Brown trout, Loch of the Green Corrie, Assynt. *John Graham*
The Kelly Kettle roaring by 'Little Green', Assynt. *Tom Harland*
River Garry, downstream of 'The Soldier's Leap'. *K. Harland*
Loch Croispol. *Jack Harland*
Loch Croispol trout. *Jack Harland*
River Tweed trout, 'A One Cast Evening'. *Tom Harland*
Sea trout, Loch a' Chlachain, Isle of Harris. *Tom Harland*
Tweed grayling, 0.5cm short! *Tom Harland*
A pretty little river Teviot grayling. *Frank Burkitt*

For Dave

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Coigach for extending their welcome to me over many years.

ONE

THE EARLY BIRD

THE HERON LIFTS off, ceding his position in the pool with a harsh croak of frustration as you arrive. Wraiths of mist are rising from the river's surface as the first grey light of dawn brings the Castle Pool into muted focus. You sit on the bench to study the water and consider your fly choice over a cup of tea. It is 6 o'clock in the morning.

Choosing a salmon fly is always more of a matter of faith than the haphazard scientific reasoning governing your trout fly selection. Your eye skims over the Willie Gunns, Ally's Shrimps, and Blue Charms, finally settling on the Posh Tosh. To my mind an unfortunately named fly for a sport with connotations of exclusivity as embedded as salmon fishing's. Nevertheless, it feels right for the morning light and the hushed water, so you swallow your pseudo-socialist hand wringing and tie it to the end of your leader with a grinner knot.

Wading in at the head of the run, knowing you will be the first to swing your fly through the storied pool that day, is exciting. Being the only human on the river, with the half-seen splashes and plops transmitting a hidden energy through the lifting mist, your senses are sharpened, and you feel alive. You are alone but sense there are other presences in the river with you. An actor posing a question to an unseen audience in a dramatic soliloquy. Your first cast lands the fly in the riffle streaming behind a partly submerged boulder near the far bank. The whole scene seems so heavily laden with the expectation

of a bright silver fish materialising from the shelter of this rock to take your lure that it never fails to amaze you when the fly swings through the run untroubled.

Your heart rate slows as you find your rhythm, casting and stepping downstream towards the deeper water as the conflicting currents coalesce into the body of the pool. You pick your way between familiar boulders, breaking the routine only to check the fly has not picked up some weed, and taking a moment to swim it in the water flowing past your feet. It looks deadly as it swims upstream, a Chartreuse body glinting seductively under a dark wing, with the visual contrast of the hot, orange jungle-cock eyes. You would approve even more if only it didn't have such an appalling name. Nevertheless, if you were a salmon you would eat it. Perhaps the king of fish demands a posh fly.

As you fish on into the calmer water, the expectation of a fish diminishes, and you begin to focus less on your fly and more on your surroundings. You chart your progress down the pool by the ruined masonry of Roxburgh Castle jutting up like teeth from the steep overgrown hillside behind. Only an arched postern door reveals it was once a defended dwelling place. It is when you are in line with this feature, paying no attention to your fishing whatsoever and casting on autopilot, that the line is suddenly wrenched through your fingers into the swirling water of the Castle Pool. A heavy fish shears off downstream, seduced by the Posh Tosh, pulling your line with it and putting a pleasing bend into the #7 rod. Heart hammering, you slosh out of the river to fight the fish on terra firma. Keeping a low profile, you fumble with your drag as the fish holds adjacent to you in the stream. Try to ease yourself downstream of it to use the current to your advantage in the fight. A glimpse of turning silver, more coppery through the lightly stained water. A thrash on the surface, then the fish bores deep again.

You decide it is time to face the inevitable guddle of trying to assemble your landing net, which is slung, folded in two, over your back. First it must be unslung then it must be swung so the handle is locked into place. Sounds simple, but attempting this manoeuvre with one hand with an angry salmon attached to your other is tricky and nerve-wracking. Predictably, folds of the net become tangled in the handle's hinge, provoking much cursing and

grunting. Eventually the net is fully deployed and submerged in the reeds in the margin. Now, with both hands back on the rod, the fish can be levered cautiously upwards towards the surface. A compact fish of perhaps 5 lbs obligingly slides over the waiting net and your third-ever salmon is waiting patiently in the water of the river's edge for you to remove the Posh Tosh from its jaw so it may continue its spawning journey.

You notice the fish is more coloured on one side than the other, an almost pinkish sheen overlying dull yellow, with a patch of fungal infection beginning to eat away at its tail. It seems as if only one half of the fish acknowledges we are now into autumn. Never mind. Holding the fish by the wrist of the tail, you gently turn it to photograph the opposing flank, which retains more silver with bolder ebony black spots. No one will know the difference, and in the photo it can be passed off as semi-fresh, late-summer grilse. You slip it back into the Castle Pool and saunter to the bench for a celebratory cup of tea. It is 7 o'clock in the morning.

One of the unexpected advantages of fatherhood for your endeavours is that the strict, austere routines of having a baby imposes lend themselves to making an early start on what few days you are able to spend fishing. Before my first daughter Polly arrived, the prospect of a 6 a.m. start to my day's fishing would have been fanciful. For one thing, I would have been too far over the blood-alcohol limit to safely drive myself to the river even in the unlikely event I had found myself conscious at such an unholy hour.

It is well known that salmon and sea trout will often move by night, taking up holding stations by day in new pools further upstream. The early bird is therefore often rewarded by simply being the first to show his or her Poshest Tosh to the new restless fish in the pool.

That morning I felt entirely satisfied with my efforts, and, after my celebratory tea, left the River Teviot before the first of the morning's Association members arrived. I cannot pretend that fatherhood has turned me into a more regularly successful fisherman, but perhaps I've become a more functional human being. I was able to reflect that this was a fish I would have been unlikely to catch had I not been a dad. Thanks, Polly.

TWO

BIRTH OF A FISHER

This moor is an open hand,
The palm lined with streams.
In winter, on the frozen land,
Tweed's Well shows up as green.

In summer when the upland dries
The source is flowing free.
A clear spring will always rise
While Tweed runs to the sea.¹

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS prior to that salmon and many miles upriver, deep in the hills of the Scottish Borders, a 10-year-old boy is fishing an upland stream by dusk. The burn in question is the Kale Water, a tributary (via the River Teviot) of the queen of Scottish salmon rivers, the Tweed.

The River Tweed, for me, is a special river since it is interwoven with my life and – of more importance and interest for this book – my fishing life. Every pool, run, and riffle is steeped in fishing folklore and legend as it winds through the rolling hills. One of my fishing heroes, the venerable master W.C. Stewart, described the Tweed and its tributaries as ‘a field for angling unmatched in the kingdom’.² The streams of the Tweed catchment tumbled

into my childhood, imprinting a connection with the land and the creatures living there. They carried learning and the ancestral traditions of the craft I needed to fulfil my bloodthirsty purposes; the long fermentation had begun. The river captured my imagination as a young boy living on its banks.

That evening, a quarter of a century ago, my younger self would have been found at Towford, high in the Cheviots, near to where my Dad took me to watch badgers emerge from their sett in the crumbling hillside. Open land, rough grazing, bracken and gorse festooned with tufts of sheep's wool. Seldom visited shepherds' country. The Kale, here just a good leap wide for a 10-year old, winds alongside a pot-holed single-track road past old shielings and tumbledown drystane dykes.

My companions were schoolfriend John, a.k.a. 'Hedge', and his mother Dot, a gentle, outdoorsy woman (imagine a female Paul Young of *Hooked on Scotland* fame). Dot was an influential figure, both for lighting the beacon of my interest in fishing and for showing me the kinds of places it was right and proper to cast a line. I was being indoctrinated into an enticing world for a youngster, full of bits of shiny gear mingling with the smoke from a campfire cooking a tin of baked beans and dog sausage.

I had come equipped: a small, inflexible, yellow spinning rod, possibly of plastic or fibreglass, with an integrated plastic reel. I was fascinated by the mepps spinners, silver with blue spots, one with a pearlescent sheen, a tiny gold one, and one with a red and green flash. Each had its own compartment in a little plastic box which closed with a satisfying click. They were alluring and worthy of such a pursuit. The gear had been assembled from the last unsold stock from my grandfather's erstwhile fishing tackle shop, McDermott's of Ashington in Northumberland. Every trip to his garage gave the impression of stumbling upon a puzzle waiting to be unlocked, a treasure trove of unfathomable rods, cute plastic squids, savage looking hooks, and manly sou'westers, musty and tactile.

YOUR FIRST FISHING trip is always an auspicious one, especially when you're a child up past your bedtime. We are in the dwimmer light of high summer. The hour of bats and soft, darkening blue skies with the last gilded

bars of cloud silhouetting the hills to the west. Hedge, nearby, is busily waving a rod he calls a fly rod; there is the sense that his method is a more advanced discipline within the sport, leaving you a little jealous.

We have come to a deep slow pool which reflects the dying light of the gloaming on its mirror-flat surface. The only sign of fish either of us has seen all day has been the lithe, darting shadows of modest upland trout seeking refuge under the banks as we stomped along. Now, even these signs of life are masked by the implacable darkness of the mysterious pool. Hedge whips the water with his fly line. Plop! The mepp lands in the pool and a few cranks of the reel's handle later it is back at the rod tip. Repeat. Again and again. A bird's nest of monofilament surrounds the reel seat and handle of the rod, but I'm having too much fun to worry about sorting that out, if indeed I would even have known how to begin addressing a fankle in the gloom.

Unbidden, implausible, and jarring, the mepp stops amidstream, a living creature erupts from the stillness of the pool and the soft night.

It leaps vertically towards the sky and hangs in the air at eye level, almost within grasp, the embers of the setting sun gleam in its turning flank as it drops back into the pool. It is with a mixture of numbness, anguish, and relief that I realise the line was savagely broken during that single leap and I am no longer connected to the wild thing conjured from the depths of the still-again water. Later, there are feelings of guilt around leaving the mepp in the fish. Slack-jawed, I am consoled by Hedge and Dot who assure me it was a good fish, the equal perhaps of the evocative Grail of the 3-pounder Hedge caught trolling in the remote and exhilarating-sounding (if, to a 10-year old, unreachable) Loch Sionascaig.

In 1653, Izaak Walton famously wrote: 'As no man is born an artist, so no man is born an Angler.'³ I returned to the tents in the gathering dusk, quiet and awed. As the first stars blinked out over the Cheviots, I naively thought myself reborn a fisherman. As Walton suggests, there was much to learn. But then again, there always will be.

Twenty-five years on, the image of that fish, momentarily unveiled, suspended mid-leap in the air, retains a sharper focus than most of my other childhood memories. Years of my eroding mental faculties – hastened by the regular abuse of alcohol, at least in the time before becoming a father – have