The Importance of G. E. M. Skues: An Angler-Writer for Today

by Robert H. Berls

In 1998, the Lyons Press, by special arrangement with A & C Black (Publishers) Ltd., published The Essential G. E. M. Skues, *edited by Kenneth Robson. The collection includes some of the best of Skues's writings from his books, articles, unpublished manuscripts, and correspondence. Robert Berls, editor of the* Bulletin *of the Anglers' Club of New York and the American correspondent for the* Flyfishers' Journal, *wrote an afterword to the book that we would like to share with you here. Additionally, Mr. Berls has chosen a few passages from the book, which follow.*

—*Editor*

Fishing on the Itchen by Winnal gas works, 1935. This was a favorite reach of Skues, and his ashes were scattered nearby.

G. E. M. Skues may be drifting from our ken; this is not as it should be for the most important fly-fishing writer of the twentieth century. This essay sets out his fundamental importance to fly fishing for trout at the end of the century.

In 1947, Skues was corresponding with a French angler and wanted to send an experimental beetle pattern to him. Skues delayed replying while he combed the meadows along the River Nadder, where he was then living, hoping to find a specimen of the actual beetle to send along with his imitation. He noted at that time of year, the small thistles with pale pinkish flowers that bloom in the meadows should be covered with the insects, but he thought that cold weather must have killed them off at an earlier stage. "For I have hunted the meadows for six days since the thistles were in bloom and have not found a single specimen." Skues was then a month short of his eighty-ninth birthday. The anecdote reveals the man: the observant eye, the persistence, the inquiring mind, the experimental angler. Though no longer able to fish or tie flies, he was still searching for a better way and trying to aid another angler.

Skues began fishing the River Itchen in 1883, by which time the dry fly was already established there—since the 1870s and probably the 1860s. In 1885, H. S. Hall wrote about the dry fly for the Badminton Library, and Frederic Halford published his first two books in 1886 and 1889, "after which," Skues wrote, "the dry fly on chalk streams became at first a rage and then a religion." John Waller Hills said in his fine autobiography, *My Sporting Life* (1934), that he bought Halford's *Floating Flies* in 1886: "I do not know how often I read it. I believe I knew it by heart. So clear was the writing, so unimpassioned, so convincing that I, like most others, took it as gospel." Hills added "no angler of this age can realize the effect Halford's books had upon our generation." Of Halford's 1886 book, he said it "was a revolution and a revelation." Skues wrote of Halford's second, 1889 book, *Dry Fly Fishing:* "I think I was at one with most anglers of the day in feeling that the last word had been written on the art of chalk-stream fishing."

Skues later lamented that "one result of the triumph of the dry fly . . . was the obliteration from the minds of men . . . of all the wet-fly lore which had served many generations of chalk stream anglers well." Anglers thought that only the dry fly could be effectively used on chalk streams. Halford asserted that the wet fly was not successful on chalk streams and that it was hopeless on hot, bright, calm days. He believed that the wet-fly angler who fished the chalk streams with an open mind would become a convert to the dry fly. Skues thought that Halford did more than anyone to discredit the wet fly on chalk streams.

But Skues had two advantages over Halford. As a young angler, he had spent much of his off-season time in the British Museum reading the fly-fishing literature and was aware of the wet-fly history on the chalk streams. In *The Way of a Trout with a Fly,* he said there is "scarcely a book on trout-fly dressing and trout fishing which I have not studied and analyzed." Also, Skues had fished the wet fly on British north-country rivers (as had Hills). Halford began his fly fishing directly with the dry

All photos courtesy The Lyons Press

Skues in his fishing garb.

fly and, as Skues observed, there is "no evidence Halford made any study of the older writers on fly dressing."

Skues also had conversations with one of the last of the old wet-fly men on the Itchen. He learned how they filled good baskets fishing downstream with long 13- or 14-foot rods, keeping their light hair lines off the water as much as possible, and drifting their wet flies over trout lying at the tails of the weed beds.

The method didn't appeal to Skues. A downstream wind was needed, since the line was too light to cast into the wind, and without a wind ripple on the super-clear chalk stream water, the downstream angler was exposed to the trout. Skues couldn't pick his days, so when he could get to the Itchen, it might be bright, calm, and the water glassy smooth.

A Happy Accident on the Itchen

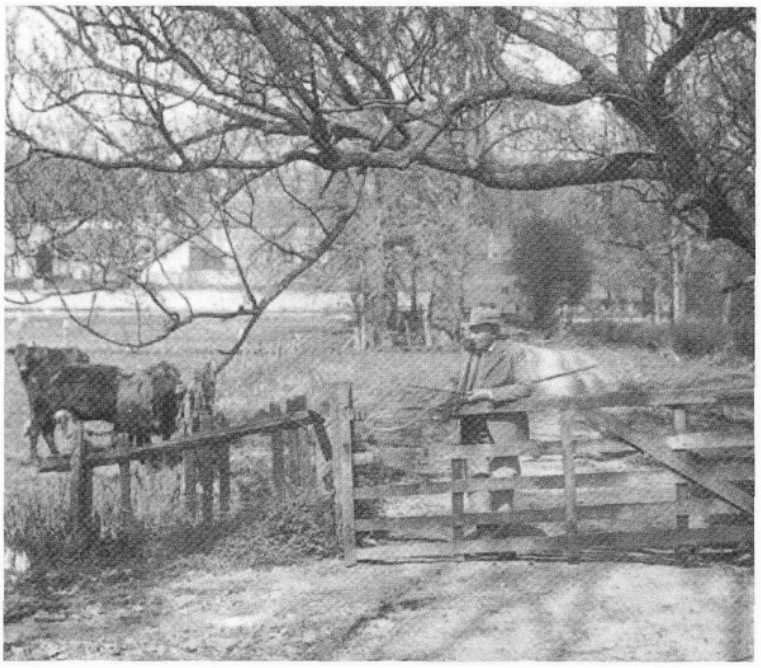
Skues's first wet-fly experience on the Itchen came by accident. In 1892, he wrote, "after some patient years of dry-fly practice, I had my first experience of the efficacy of the wet fly on the Itchen." His wet-fly success occurred when dry flies with inadequate hackles were immediately seized by trout when they sank after having been refused when floating. Several years later, after another accidental success with the wet fly on a difficult German limestone river, Skues began to think seriously about the systematic use of the wet fly on chalk streams.

Skues reasoned that if he were to succeed with the wet fly, and having eschewed the old downstream technique, it must be by a wet-fly modification of the dry-fly method of upstream casting to individual fish. He began with the bulgers.

For many years, Skues wrote, bulgers were the despair of his life. The trout would be seen actively feeding under the surface, swirling left and right, thereby making a boil or bulge in the surface. Skues cited a letter written to *The Fishing Gazette* in which the writer complained that if the "trout were bulging you might as well chuck your hat at them" as a fly. Halford had advised dry-fly anglers to leave bulging fish alone. But Skues had fished the Tweed where the trout bulged all the time, and the Tweed wet-fly men had success with them. So Skues showed the Itchen trout an old Tweed wet pattern, the Greenwell's Glory, well soaked, cast upstream to the feeding fish "like a floating fly" but sunk, and had success with it.

Skues sent a short article to *The Field* in 1899, which he regarded as the "first public statement of the modern theory of wet-fly fishing on chalk streams . . ." The article, modestly titled "A Wet-Fly Suggestion," described his antidote to the bitter complaints of dry-fly men that the trout are bulging more each year, taking nymphs as they come up to hatch. So Skues asked, "What is the moral for the dry-fly man? . . . When your fish are bulging give it to them wet." In the past, he observed, "anglers used to get good baskets on Itchen and Test with the wet fly. They will have to come back to it again. Someday they will learn to combine . . . wet-fly science and dry-fly art . . ."

In the same year as Skues's article, Sir Edward Grey published his classic book, *Fly Fishing,* and opined that north-country wet-fly tactics will not work on the



Skues at the gate between Nun's Walk and the fishery. Abbots Barton Farm is behind him.

southern chalk streams, and in any case, he knew the wet fly well enough to be sure that it had "very narrow limits" on a chalk stream. Grey was wrong.

In 1900, Skues began fishing a fly that later became famous, the Tup's Indispensable. The originator of the fly intended it for a spinner (it was a wingless, cock's hackled pattern), but Skues discovered that dressed with a shorter, softer hackle and fished wet, it worked better with the bulgers than his winged wet Greenwell's. When soaked, "it was a remarkable imitation of a nymph he got from a trout's mouth." It became the foundation of a small number of nymph patterns. In his early experiments, Skues thought his wet flies were taken for hatching nymphs. But then he found nymphs in trouts' mouths "with no show of wings." This led him to experiment with short-hackled, wingless patterns dressed to imitate nymphs.

Skues always found "that pernicious insect," the blue-winged olive hatch, to be difficult. Dry flies didn't work for him. He tied his first specific nymph imitation for this hatch. With a dubbed body of olive seal's and bear's furs and a turn of a tiny blue hackle, he had immediate success with it after the trout, as usual, declined his floaters. But "on this subject," he noted, "I am only at the beginning of inquiry."

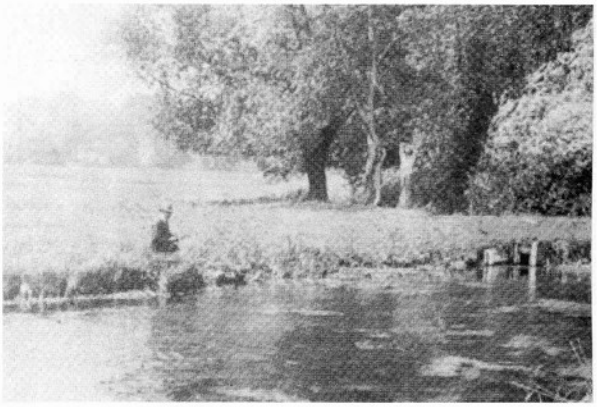
Other anglers had not "suspected the propensity of chalk stream trout," Skues observed, "to feed largely on nymphs (outside the practice of bulging)." Most chalk-stream anglers were unaware that "for hours and days at a time the trout were feeding on nymphs and were letting the natural hatched-out insect go by." These anglers kept casting dry flies at "trout which were seen to be breaking the surface." Skues's observations of the overwhelming propensity of trout to feed on nymphs were confirmed by his analyses of stomach contents. "Up to the present," he wrote in a 1930 article, "I do not think there has been a trout whose stomach has yielded two percent of winged duns. Nymphs, nymphs, nymphs, all nymphs."

He thought that the vast majority of even highly experienced anglers were ignorant of the nymph's existence, its form and character. Halford, however, was not one of them. Skues noted that Halford's analyses of stomach contents revealed to him that the vast bulk of the trout's food was under water. But Halford ignored the implication because he believed the nymph could not be imitated. In his 1886 book, *Floating Flies,* Halford advised the dry-fly angler to avoid trout feeding on larvae, shrimp, and snail. And in his 1889 book, *Dry Fly Fishing,* he pronounced that head and tail rises of trout were a bad sign because it indicated that the trout were feeding on larvae close to the surface. He came to warn dry-fly anglers off bulgers and tailers too.

John Waller Hills remembers in *My Sporting Life* that when he first started to fish the Ramsbury water on the Kennet in 1902, the purist "reigned a despot: nothing was admitted but the dry fly. Nymphs were not dreamed of." Hills continued: "Halford's very real invention and advance had reached its limit and had run itself out. We went to sleep over our oars. We became set and inflexible and it was not until we read Mr. Skues's *Minor Tactics* in 1910 that we woke up." After describing recent changes in dry flies—his introduction of the spent spinner and new dry-fly designs for duns—he turned back to Skues. "But the greatest change was started by Mr. Skues's book. I was fascinated by it . . . " He also noted that Skues's reform made way slowly. And Halford did not yield an inch.

In his last book, *The Dry Fly Man's Handbook* of 1913 (he was dead the next year), Halford gave what amounts to a

"There's the first blue-winged olive of the season." 1923



Fishing the Back Stream in 1921. The bottom of Duck's Nest Spinney with aqueduct.

reply to *Minor Tactics.* "I am told, however, that there is a school of fly fishermen who only fish the sunk fly over a feeding fish or one in position if it will not take a floating fly. This . . . is a third method of wet-fly fishing, the other two being the more ordinary of fishing the water with sunk fly either upstream or downstream. Candidly, I have never seen this method in practice, and I have grave doubts as to its efficacy."

The Nymph's Efficacy

Skues had no doubt as to the nymph's efficacy. In 1939, he reflected that his method of nymph fishing "constitutes as real if not as great an advance in the art of fly fishing as the dry fly indubitably did. It has the merit of superseding or getting over serious difficulties and limitations of the dry fly . . ."

Skues's great insight was that trout in chalk streams mainly eat nymphs, including during hatches, and not the adult, emerged flies. He developed the flies and the fishing method to implement that insight. Halford's dry flies were a final flowering of the Victorian dry fly, which was essentially the old winged wet fly made "vertical." But nymphs tied specifically as imitations of larvae were new and radical. No one else did this before Skues with the exception of George Selwyn Marryat, the gray eminence behind Halford, who had tied nymph imitations in 1883 but soon abandoned them. Marryat probably fished them downstream in the old wet-fly style. (George Holland, the renowned professional fly tyer in Winchester, who dressed the nymphs for Marryat according to his specifications, told Skues that Marryat never caught any trout with them.) Skues had a truly modern mind, and he saw, generations ahead, what is becoming the predominant approach today in fishing hatches on fertile, insect-rich streams on either side of the Atlantic. The combination of low-floating dry flies, so-called emergers or nymphs fished in the surface or fractionally below it, and in the upstream style to rising fish, owes its origin to Skues.

As with many profound innovations, Skues's discovery and development of nymphs and his method of fishing them seems simple in retrospect, but it wasn't. The great Marryat didn't do it, Halford couldn't do it, Skues did. He had his own early failure. Skues remembered that as early as 1888 he "was already intrigued by the idea of representing the nymph artificially," but like Marryat, Skues also abandoned it "for a long time, discouraged no doubt by the failure of G. S. Marryat and Holland . . ." But Skues returned to the idea, persisted, and changed the world of fly fishing for trout.

Skues thought that his nymph fishing was a new art, or perhaps he thought it was "fairer to say, a new phase of an old and largely forgotten art." John Waller Hills was right that Skues led a counter-reformation of the wet fly against the dry fly, but only partly right, for the fully aware and deliberate representation (Skues always preferred that word to imitation) of the nymph was new. So it was a counter-reformation with a new theology and not just a revival of the old faith.

Skues had always maintained that the nymph was supplemental to the dry fly. At the time of publication of *Minor Tactics,* I think he believed it; my judgment is that he no longer did by his later writings, but maintained the assertion as a defensive position. Later in life my reading is that he saw the nymph as the central method of chalk-stream fishing. In the fourth 1949 edition of *The Way of a Trout with a Fly,* he added a chapter called "The Constant Nymph," referring to the predilection of trout to feed on nymphs over duns—"the strong attraction of the constant nymph." It was

"nymphs, nymphs, nymphs, all nymphs" as he declared in his 1930 article. In the posthumously published *Itchen Memories* (1951), Skues said in the preface that "for several years past, therefore, I have only fished the floating fly when I was definitely convinced that that was what the trout were taking . . . " In "The Constant Nymph," Skues summed up: " . . . the angler who offers his trout a proper pattern of nymph stands a better chance of sport than does one who offers it a floating fly." He never abandoned the dry fly, of course; there were times it fished best when the trout actually were on the emerged duns (and, of course, spinners), and he still enjoyed fishing dry flies. He came then, I believe, to feel that the nymph was the major method on chalk streams, not an auxiliary to the dry fly. Why didn't he say so explicitly? Because he knew he was holding a red flag in his hands and he did not want to wave it, too, at the dry-fly men. So he maintained his deflationary title in 1921 when he subtitled his book *And Some Further Studies in Minor Tactics,* and he maintained his deflationary position in the 1939 statement cited earlier, so as to try to turn away wrath with a soft word. He knew that the statement quoted from the preface to *Itchen Memories* would not be published until after his death.

Halford was long gone, but his followers remained and they were still a problem for Skues. The members of the Abbots Barton syndicate on the Itchen, to which he belonged, came to disapprove of his use of the nymph; then Skues was "a minority of one," as he put it, against restocking the water, and guest days were gradually restricted until he was required to share a rod with a guest or let the guest do all the fishing. Skues wrote "more and more I resented these restrictions," and he resigned his rod on the Itchen in 1938 where he had fished for fifty-six years.

That same year, Skues took part in a "star chamber" of a debate (as Donald Overfield has described it) at the Flyfishers' Club, which essentially put on trial his life's work in establishing the nymph as an effective and ethical method on chalk streams. Opinion at the debate went against Skues. To then make a claim for the nymph as the central technique of chalk-stream fishing and the demotion of the dry fly to second rank would have only intensified Skues's problems and brought them on earlier.

Skues kept other things to himself.

- Gordon Mackie wrote in *Trout and Salmon* magazine some years ago that Skues knew the "induced take" (moving the nymph slightly as it comes close to a trout to stimulate a take), but avoided writing about it for fear that any intentional movement of the fly would have aroused cries of his using the old downstream and dragging wet fly.
- Skues had corresponded extensively with James Leisenring, and probably was aware of the "lift" technique, but if so, he again refrained from writing of it.
- Frank Sawyer, in his 1958 book, *Nymphs and the Trout,* had criticized Skues for writing that nymphs floated inertly in the surface. Sawyer argued that there is always some movement in the nymph. But Sawyer's statement is only partly true: periods of vigorous movement to break from the shuck alternate with inert rest. The struggle to escape the shuck is not continuous. This is certainly true of the nymphs of the *Baetis* and *Ephemerella* genera in insect-rich, flat-water spring creeks in the United States. These genera also would have been the two most important to Skues and the chalk streams. Henrik Thomsen, the Danish fly tyer, made the same observation of alternating struggle and inert drift in his excellent 1981 paper, "G. E. M. Skues: The Conservative Rebel."

Skues was too close an observer not to have been aware of any characteristic movement of nymphs as they drifted in or just below the surface. His assertion of a comprehensive inertia may have been debate-tactical. If Skues had admitted that nymphs move as they drift under the surface, he would have yielded the argument over the effectiveness of nymph fishing to Halford, who, of course, asserted that nymphs could not be imitated because of their vigorous wiggling movement. Skues needed to maintain his no-movement assertion, or his counter-argument to Halford would have been severely weakened—as a debating matter, not in actuality.

Vincent Marinaro criticized Skues for not "emancipating" the dry fly as he did the wet. I do not know whether Skues could have done so, but he was not likely to focus on it after 1921 or so, when the dry fly became less and less important to his thinking. The dry fly wasn't central to him or to his estimation of generally effective chalk-stream fishing anymore. His awareness of "the constant nymph" pushed aside the dry fly's importance.

Skues thought that many dry flies, winged floating patterns, were only taken by the trout because of their resemblance to nymphs anyway, the wings being ignored. He believed that nymphs were far more precise imitations than wet flies and "probably more exact than floating artificial flies are of the floating natural duns or spinners." He was convinced that it was more important to offer the right nymph to the trout than the right dry fly "for the trout gets a clearer view of its subaqueous food than it does of its surface prey." These are not the considerations of a man who believes the dry fly to be central to chalk-stream fishing and the nymph its auxiliary.

John Waller Hills described how the trout beat him one evening on the Test, with Skues as his guest, in the blue-winged olive hatch. Skues saw that the "trout were taking not the hatched fly, but the hatching nymph, on or just below the surface. A difficult thing to spot: fish are not moving about as when bulging, but stationary, apparently rising. He had seen this, I had not. He had caught fish, I had not." Skues was a master at reading the message of the rise form.

Skues wrote in 1939: "The due appreciation of how a trout is rising forms the very essence of fishing, whether it be with floating fly or artificial nymph —and it is often no easy matter." Prior to Skues, there had been "*no systematic attempt* [my emphasis] to differentiate the varying forms of the rise of trout" in angling literature. In *The Way of a Trout with a Fly,* Skues analyzed the types of rises because he believed that "close study of the form of the rise may often give the observant angler a clue, otherwise lacking, to the type of fly which the trout is taking, and to the stage and condition in which he is taking it."

Norman McCaskie described "Skues's differentiation of the rise forms of trout as the greatest feat of pure observation in the annals of fishing." Even given that McCaskie, no mean angler or writer himself, was a friend of Skues, this high praise still stands. Skues's differentiation of rise forms was a direct influence on Vincent Marinaro, who thought that recognizing the various rise forms by the trout fisherman "is as important as a fingerprint or footprint in human affairs."

Skues the Tactician

Skues was a great fly-fishing tactician, probably the best ever for the kind of fishing he loved: the fertile, insect-rich, flat-water streams of the chalk valleys. Reading Skues on tactics today is like going fishing on a great and challenging trout stream with a friend who is the best angler you have ever met. Whether it's Skues showing you why the left bank, for a right-handed angler, with his rod-hand on the inshore side, is the bank of advantage, not a handicap; or joining his adventures with the alder fly on a German limestone river; or why a day blowing a gale, and a large dry fly, is the recipe for catching a big trout if you know where one lies; reading him on tactics is a delight, never dated, and absorbingly interesting.

Skues gave the nymph its myth, as Datus Proper said Vincent Marinaro did for terrestrials. But Skues was much concerned with terrestrials, too: he had a floating red ant imitation that would have satisfied Marinaro's criteria even though Marinaro said he could find none in the American literature and nothing acceptable in the British. Halford's ant, a whimsical Victorian version, looked like an upwinged mayfly imitation. (That may explain why Theodore Gordon thought the Royal Coachman was an ant imitation.) Skues was also much taken with beetles; he used and devised several imitations, fished both dry and wet. He ignored grasshoppers, but they are a hot-summer insect, not a usual event in Britain. Ants and beetles flourish everywhere, however.

As terrestrials have assumed large importance in modern fly fishing for trout, especially in the United States, so has the soft hackle fly. Soft hackles are prominent now in fishing hatches by both dry fly and nymph fishermen. Skues pointed out that "the hackle provides flotation and imitates wings and legs. The soft tips of the hackles make a far less alarming drag than does a cock's hackle." Datus Proper said that "Skues deserves much of the credit for bringing the soft-hackle design to the attention of modern dry-fly and nymph fishers."

In Colonel E. W. Harding's "splendid treatise," as Marinaro called it, entitled *The Flyfisher and the Trout's Point of View* (1931), Harding noted that Skues was the first to discuss the trout's point of view systematically: that is, what the trout sees and how it sees it. Harding said that Skues's *The Way of a Trout with a Fly* was the primary inspiration for his own book. He added that "I doubt whether the value of *The Way of a Trout with a Fly* is realized even yet, nor how it must eventually affect the form of fly fishing literature."

Skues's writings on nymphs, rise forms, and the trout's point of view have directly and indirectly influenced the mainstream of writing about imitative fly fishing for trout in the twentieth century from Harding to Marinaro, Datus Proper, Clarke and Goddard, Gary Borger, and Gary LaFontaine. Harding was thought a crank on the chalk streams, and his book languished until after World War II, when Marinaro picked it up and began the dry-fly revolution of our time. Datus Proper, after acknowledging the personal influence of Marinaro and his writings, said that "only G. E. M. Skues has made a comparable impact on my thinking." Proper was referring to his own landmark book, *What the Trout Said.*

The Way of a Trout with a Fly, in addition to the profound insights it provides (Gary Borger said that it "can never age because it provides so many basic insights into trout fishing"), became so influential because it laid out an agenda for future studies in imitative trout fishing. That was a great thing to have done.

Alfred North Whitehead, in a famous remark, said that the safest, general characterization of European philosophy is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. In many fundamental respects, modern studies in imitative fly fishing for trout are a series of footnotes to Skues.