

What makes the spey cast so special, 150 years on?

Spey casting is poetry in motion, a testament to the fine art of flyfishing, but it was not always so revered. Colin Bradshaw tells the fascinating story of a modern love affair which now spans the world as a new book appears by the master, Simon Gawesworth

JUST when we fishers think we have worked out how to perform that amazing salmon fly-casting technique the spey cast, it moves on. It is now more than 150 years old, but has never been so popular, nor so widely and internationally acknowledged as such

together. It has allowed the long rod and the spey cast to prove themselves as effective, safe, and above all a joy to use.

Fuelled by this new international interest and the improvement of fishing tackle, the spey cast is rapidly evolving. Again, the British showed the way. Simon Gawesworth,

this master of the art tells the world what, precisely, a spey cast is: 'The main difference between spey casting and regular overhead casting is that there isn't a backcast where the fly goes behind the caster. The most obvious use, therefore, is when there are obstructions behind the fly caster that prevent



PICTURES BY SCOTT NELSON

an important cast—perhaps the pre-eminent cast in modern flyfishing.

The spey cast has been re-energised through new enthusiasm from the USA, Canada and elsewhere. It took the British 150 years to persuade American fishers that the long rod used in spey casting is a good idea, but now several British spey casters make their living demonstrating in the USA.

Perhaps ironically, it was in Russia that the case for the long rod and the spey cast was won. With the opening up of the wonderful salmon rivers of the Kola Peninsula of Russia, influential fishers from all nationalities now meet, mingle and fish to-

Simon Gawesworth demonstrates modern spey style: it uses flatter movements and faster-action rods than traditional styles, improving efficiency of the cast.

of Devon, is thought to have invented the first modern spey cast with his snake roll of the early-1980s. This, perhaps more than any other cast, caught the imagination of the rest of the world, and his most recent book on the subject (*Spey Casting*, Stackpole Books, £29.95) is a feast for flyfishers, whose fascination with the spey cast is limitless.

In his book, Gawesworth describes the techniques in loving detail, complete with copious diagrams and photographs; but first

an overhead cast from being used. But there are other reasons to use spey casts.

'Once mastered, they require much less effort to pick up a line and change direction than the overhead cast. They are also a quicker way to change direction, meaning more time is spent with the fly in the water, fishing. Spey casting is also safer, and creates fewer wind knots. All in all, they are extremely useful casts to learn and, as a Scottish ghillie told me, once you have learned how to spey cast, you will never use the overhead cast again.

'Spey casting is wonderful. The skill, timing, and moves are beautiful to watch and

extremely satisfying to perform. It is more akin to art or poetry than a way to get a hook into a river. It requires perfect timing and a feel for the line that does not develop overnight—no matter how good an overhead caster you are. Patience and practice are the virtues of a spey caster.

‘Anyone learning to spey cast should recognise the initial three measures of success. The first is, “Did I avoid hooking myself?” After that, “Did I avoid hooking the trees behind me?” And lastly, “Did the fly get out into the river roughly where I wanted it to go and where it could catch a fish?” As long as the cast is getting the fly out there, it is working. Ultimately, most casters settle into a style of their own, and as long as the fly gets to the fish, it doesn’t really matter what the cast looks like.’



Gawesworth’s favourite form of casting now is with the single-handed rod. One advantage is in leaving a spare hand to accelerate the line, as in this, the turbo spey.

Most authorities agree that for a cast to be a member of the celebrated spey family, three things must happen. The first is that the line must change direction. Typically this means that the line starts pointing downstream and ends up being cast at 45 degrees or so across the current. The second is that a loop must be formed below the rod tip, and the third is that this loop (or a small part of it) touches the water before it is propelled for the final cast.

My introduction to spey casting came at a CLA Game Fair, when the late Arthur Oglesby and Hugh Falkus were masters of the art. They used big, powerful Bruce & Walker rods with heavy double taper lines, and, being themselves big, strong men with excellent technique, they could send out the



A ‘weird cast’, the perry poke is ideal for casting sink tips. In a master’s hands the results are astonishing.

full fly line of 35 yards and more. We mortals were happy with a solid 25-yard cast.

Today, technological advances in rods and lines, coupled with ‘modern’ technique, have added a full 20 yards in the tournament arena. At last year’s CLA Game Fair, the Musto Spey Casting Championship was won by Scott MacKenzie from Inverness with a staggering cast of 59 yards. Like his predecessors, Scott uses a Bruce & Walker rod, and is a big man. But even small boys can make long casts today. Much has changed, in technique and,

of course, equipment.

Some of us love change: manufacturers and retailers for obvious commercial reasons, and the fisher because it gives him new ‘toys’, new subjects to discuss, and new techniques to master. Spey casting offers them all. The flyfisher does not even need to be near a river bank to enjoy spey casting, either—the jargon alone will keep the mind active for some considerable time. There are multiple casts, multiple styles

and multiple names for every aspect, including the perry poke, the snap T and the latest sensation from Sweden, the underhand spey (which sounds very unsporting).

When I was a boy, things were much less exciting. Back then it was simple. In a downstream wind we used the double spey, in an upstream wind we used the single spey. If there was little or no wind we used the one we liked best. Today, here is your choice: in a downstream wind use the double spey, snake roll, Skagit double (with or without a perry poke), turbo double or the underhand spey over the downwind shoulder. In an upstream wind you can use the single spey, spiral single, snap-T, snap-C, snap-Z or Skagit single (with or without a perry poke), turbo single or underhand single spey. And in little or no wind? Better smoke a Hamlet.

Even our familiar British classics, the double and single spey casts, have now changed. The final loop is



The cast that changed the angling world: Gawesworth’s snake roll, forerunner of all modern spey casts, which he invented as a boy: ‘I wanted to call it the sausage roll.’

formed by a lower and smoother sweep rather than the more familiar pronounced U-shaped dip of the rod tip. The big round loop of old is now a D-loop and, for tournament casters, an arrow-pointed loop.

Perhaps now you see what I mean. We mortals have missed out. The spey cast has moved on. We need to re-train, and (the interesting part for many of us) re-tool. We need lighter, faster rods and specialised spey lines. We need to attend one of the spey casting ‘claves’ to be held in the USA this year, where a new spey cast will almost certainly be introduced. We must mothball



Another single-handed version. Gawesworth’s father gave it two names: cast stringing, and the Heineken cast because it works in almost impossible situations.

our old casting books and videos, and buy new. Some of us might even invent our very own spey cast, perhaps to be named the ‘poke, splash and tangle’. I hope so. I can feel a visit to the tackle shop coming on. □

¶ *‘Spey Casting’, by Simon Gawesworth, is published in hardback by Stackpole Books (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, USA), priced £29.95. To order a signed copy at £24.95, call CountryClubuk on 020 7291 8600. Recommended viewing: ‘International Spey Casting’ by Jim Vincent, Simon Gawesworth and Leif Stavmo (Rio Products, DVD and video); ‘Spey Casting Secrets’: experts from Sandy River Spey Clave (Native Fish Society, 2003, video).*