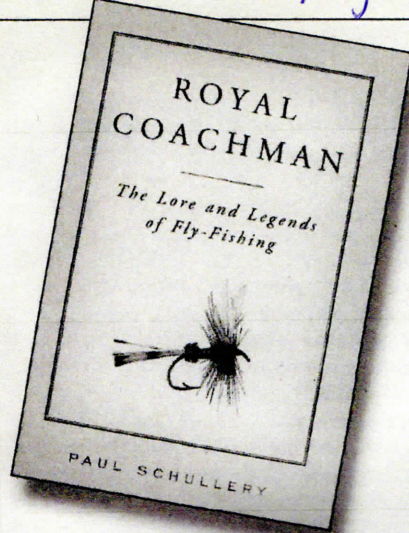


Royal Coachman

Royal Coachman—The Lore and Legends of Fly-Fishing, by Paul Schullery. Simon & Schuster, 1999, 220 pages, \$24 hardcover.

IF YOU ENJOY READING BUT YOU'RE not familiar with Paul Schullery's work, well, what have you been doing? Schullery has written, co-written, or edited 28 volumes to date, taking on subjects ranging from Teddy Roosevelt to the early ski pioneers of Yellowstone to the history of the Orvis Company. His work consistently combines thorough and impeccable research with a penchant for calling it just exactly how he sees it.



In *Royal Coachman*, Schullery primarily goes about the business of getting to the bottom of things. He sets Gary LaFontaine and John Gierach straight about who gets to be a "trout bum." He debunks the myth of Dame Juliana Berners. He deconstructs assertions that fly fishing—and fly tying and bamboo rod-building—represent art. He scoffs at the notion that outdoors writing—most of it, anyway—is literature. In doing so, Schullery renders reasoning and prose that is right and clear and largely unassailable.

In "The Fisherman's Chaucer," Schullery casts doubt on the very existence of Dame Juliana Berners, and effectively questions her authorship of the *Treatise on Fishing with an Angle*, and her originality as a fly-fishing writer. "Richard Hoffman," Schullery points out, "has exposed an extraordinary variety of pre-1496 manuscript fishing material from various parts of Europe . . ."

The less rigorous student of fly-fishing bibliographies (read: me) may be more sanguine about Dame Juliana's existence than Richard Hoffman's—and yet apparently he's out there researching old texts. This is the sort of thing Schullery excels at bringing to the fore. He tells us things we didn't know and things we thought we did know, but really didn't.

Schullery cut his teeth knocking around the archives of Yellowstone National Park during his years of employ there. This early training in documentary research blesses his more insightful writing today.

For Schullery, for instance, it's not enough to claim you're a trout bum. In "All the Young Men with Fly Rods," Schullery digs up the earliest example of a trout bum he can find—a character named John Dennison, a.k.a. "Johnny Trout," who, according to a letter published in the 1832 issue of *The American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*, "probably killed more trout than any one

person in the United States." He also gives us Shorty, "Shark of the Stream," from an 1879 tome.

Supplied with historical precedents and drawing from their lineage, Schullery then goes about defining the very essence of bumhood:

"But it is in considering Shorty and others like him that I find Gary LaFontaine's definition of a trout bum most unsuccessful. That Shorty had a house, a wife, and six children does not weaken his claim to bumhood but strengthens it. Here he was, 50 years old . . . with all these apparent responsibilities, and he didn't give in. He didn't even run away to escape them; he just ignored them and went fishing. That's commitment."

Though he covers every inch of the whole nine yards with a sly irony, Schullery's work is never punishing. He's a teacher, not an iconoclast. Anybody willing to pause from paragraph to paragraph, set the book on his or her knee, and stare out the window for a while will find ample fodder for rumination. Among others, in "All the Young Men . . ." Schullery poses this gem: "What is it that makes fly fishing so commercially marketable now, at the same time that we fly fishermen are such a fractious, lampoonable crowd?"

"Royal Coachman and Friends," Schullery's chapter on the magical Royal Coachman, is a fine example of hardcore book learning dashed with folksy insight. Concluding a rich history of the pattern and its impact on the sport, Schullery opines:

"Maybe knowing that it has worked so often for so long is good enough, and maybe part of its real glamour and appeal is that we don't understand why it works . . . The Royal Coachman . . . will always have its days, and those days are surely not less rich for a little mystery."

But don't stop with "Royal Coachman and Friends," and don't stop with *Royal Coachman*. All of Schullery's works should be required reading.

Who wants to say what is "true" anymore? Changes in the framework of revisionism, the unforgiving template of political correctness, the media age's skittish overexposure of "experts" all leave writers with a skittish tendency to hedge bets. But you can bet that hours of observation and research have Schullery firmly believing that what he writes is as close to the "truth" as we're going to get for now.

JEFF HULL