

LOOKING UP

John Gierach –  
an appreciation



By Peter Butler  
*Redstone Review*

LYONS – Shortly after the Lyons flood of 2013, some progress had been made on restoration work, and Governor Hickenlooper came and stood by the Rainbow Bridge at Apple Valley Road and gave a speech. I don't know what he said because I was

too busy grabbing photographs for the *Redstone*. In those days, Hwy. 36 was still closed and I would run with Zen the dog along the deserted tarmac and chat with the road workers. One of them had given me a tip that the governor was on his way. Later I processed my images and set off for John and Susan Gierach's house with a disk.

Susan was away but John was there and it was the first time I had approached him individually. It was a beautiful autumn morning and he was very welcoming. I blurted something along the lines of "Hi, I'm so and so and I've got pictures" and John said, "Yes I know who you are."

I still get an upwelling of adrenaline just thinking of it. As I wondered back to the car I thought to myself "Wow – John Gierach knows who I am," and polishing my smirk – "THE John Gierach".

John had always had local superstar status amongst anybody with any sort of literary or artistic aspirations. After all he was "The most famous fishing writer IN THE WORLD" which is how I always describe him. Later on, as I came to contribute more regularly to the *Redstone* I was warmly welcomed into the team and had the chance to spend more time with John.

Being the gratuitous hero worshiper that I am, I always angled to sit opposite, or next to him, and tried to glean some sort of rubbed off wisdom about great prose. He was very gracious, but later, when he relaxed, he would reveal that in his position as fly casting guru, myriads of other

people wanted that same magic whether on the river bank or at a book signing.

Being an introverted sort, he would prefer to retreat to some secret idyll to revel in his solitude for as long as possible. Once he revealed a story that although he was a self-confessed computer and social media Luddite, occasionally there would be threads of gossip on some fishing group's website that, "Gierach had been spotted on some water or other." He had a quiet smile about that.

My humble jottings eventually settled on a left hand page of the *Redstone Review* opposite John's monthly ruminations on the right hand side of the double page spread. Every month I would peer across the gutter, read his piece, and hope that I was worthy. It was a poignant juxtaposition

and Schuster, one of the five giants of global book production. They saw something special in his work and he continued with them. That global marketing machine helped give him the wider audience that he deserved, and he became much loved. When I first read some of his works I was expecting all sorts of wisdom about reading the water and choosing such and such a fly. But it was much more about his thoughts and musings, the Gierach philosophy but with some fishing in the background. That approach made him so much more approachable by a lay audience and is surely the root of his success.

I knew a few of his fishing titles with dry and witty titles like *Death, Taxes and Leaky Waders*, *Standing in a River Waving a Stick* and *Another Lousy Day In Paradise* but I was surprised to learn that his total life's work amounted to more than 30 publications ranging to poetry as well. His last fishing title that was published in March 2023 is called *All the Time in the World*. At our last meeting, when I looked at this Gandalf of the dry fly with his deeply weathered face and tired eyes, I could tell that there was a large dose of irony in that choice of words. He promised to sign a copy for an angling friend of ours but sadly we were too slow.

John was a vital contributor to the *Redstone Review* newspaper and much wider afield, but fate stole him from us suddenly and unexpectedly. We may not have his monthly column to enjoy any more, or his company at the table for some of us lucky ones, but his *Trout Bum* will be on the same library shelves, all over the world, as the giants of American literature like Herman Melville.

After all, *Moby Dick* is a book about human nature with some whaling in the background. In fact, Melville devotes a whole chapter to discussing whether a whale is a fish or not. So it's psychological analysis with fishing in the background. They're virtually blood brothers. But let's wander down the library a few aisles and here are Plato and Shakespeare. John Gierach will be amongst his coworkers for eternity.

And we locals will have fond memories of a great friend.

*Peter Butler was born in India and lived in a house facing a giant kapok tree. Growing up in England there were trees but never quite enough. After qualifying as biochemist there as a gradual evolution into being a graphic designer. He and his wife Deirdre moved to the States in 1997 and to Lyons in 2000. Finally, there are enough trees.*



for me. His writing was so straight forward and clean and without any pretension, but always to the point and clearly thought through. He would write as if he were talking to an old friend across the table, but make clear arguments that the rest of us might fumble over. He would cast a fly and catch a fish but he could cast an eye across humanity, in all its triumphs and agonies, and catch the drift of the moment. A lifetime as a local journalist had polished his filtering skills.

Louis Pasteur said that chance favored the prepared mind and John had that advantage. He had previously been published by a local publishing house and had some success when the company was acquired by none less than Simon