

**Andrew Brown** joined the *Independent* in 1986 and for the next decade was its religious affairs correspondent, parliamentary sketch writer and a features writer. He now writes regularly for the *Guardian* and contributes to *Prospect* and the *New Statesman*. His other books include *The Darwin Wars* and *In the Beginning Was the Worm*.

‘[A] marvellously seamless fusion of personal memoir and politico-cultural survey’ *Independent on Sunday*

‘[Brown] is a deft writer with a real descriptive talent and a humorous touch . . . this is an affectionate and insightful portrait, offering a much deeper understanding of the country than the usual, often politically motivated, tendency to stereotype’ *Financial Times*

‘Brown’s Sweden is a place of inconsistencies, perplexing omissions, inevitable human frailty and . . . fish. Brown’s enthusiastic angling produces some of the most lyrical passages in the book . . . He writes eloquently about the Swedish countryside, the shining lakes, the long summer days . . . It is this ordinary, flawed but hardly pathological Sweden that Brown celebrates in this enjoyably understated book’ *Observer*

‘Brown’s prose is as clear and bewitching as the lake waters which he learns to fish . . . Readers who know the Nordic countries will delight in the author’s keen ear and eye for the nuances of language, landscape and social customs’ *Economist*

‘Deftly weaving rhapsodies of fishing in Swedish waters with political observations, [Brown] has written an idiosyncratic and highly enjoyable memoir of the fall of the New Jerusalem of the Left’ *Literary Review*

‘His evocations of his early years in the country are miracles of sensuous recollection . . . He describes well the flat-pack rationality of Swedish politics in the Sixties and Seventies’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘Reveals a darker aspect of Swedish society: oppressed by social controls, frustrated by strict conservatism and moderated by civic duty’ *The Times*

‘This book is worth looking at just for the fantastic passages on the country’s climate and landscape, literary gems in the best tradition of nature writing’ *Morning Star*

‘A wise respectful and wonderfully written book’ *Guardian*

# Fishing in Utopia

Sweden and the Future  
that Disappeared

Andrew Brown

GRANTA

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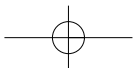
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*For Anita and Felix, with love.*



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## The pike summer

Lilla Edet was so quiet a town when I lived there that I learned to distinguish the smells of different trees. There were distinct scents of pine, of spruce, and of the birches whose pollen made tears run down my face.

When I cycled to the square in the centre of the town the creaking of the wheels was the loudest sound. Opposite the school buildings in which nothing seemed ever to happen there was a wide dusty verge between the asphalt road and a meadow where wild flowers grew on tall coarse stems. On this strip magpies hopped and hoodie crows shuffled among the dust and stone chips. I never saw what they ate nor heard a songbird.

In that dry and dusty time I seemed to be cycling everywhere, either to the library, or the lakes in the forests that surround the town. There is never enough water in my memories of southern Sweden. For three months of the year it was all frozen anyway. But even in summer, the thin soil always seemed dry; the brown pine needles that nestled in every crevice of the rocks were hard and sharp as weathered bones. So to look at the lakes, and to breathe their damp exhalations, was a kind of healing. I didn't have to catch anything; not always even to

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fish. What I needed was to gaze into the surface and, by gazing, to pass into another world, and breathe.

In town, the library was always cool, and smelt of plastic and modernity. I borrowed books about chess, which were easy to read because they were written in clichés when not in algebraic notation; comic books about a cowboy, translated from the French, which taught me more varied and idiomatic Swedish; but I learned most of the language from the library's copy of Brian Clarke's *Pursuit of Stillwater Trout*, or *På jakt efter Stillavattens Öring*. I learned it by heart. If you had read any sentence in that book to me, I could have come up with the preceding one as well as the successor. The promise of fly fishing was that the world I pressed against when I looked at a lake would be deeper and richer than anything I had yet imagined. I wanted to break through there. I loved the illustrations of water beasts that garnished his text. There were delicate line drawings of damselfly nymphs, which are, despite their name, incessantly voracious and shaped like rapiers, with a long pointed tail and a short head, like an elaborate hilt. There were veiled sedge pupae swimming towards the surface, their legs and wings bundled up in a transparent membrane; and dangly midge larvae, feathery at each end, twisting as they waited for trout to seize them. These fabulous monsters peopled my imagination. Some have remained fabulous to this day. I still have never seen a sedge pupa that looked remotely like anything in that book. In real life, they look like tiny, soggy kidney beans.

Clarke's is a rather dogmatic book, written as if to break through to an inattentive and self-confident audience. I read it as an exercise at first, and then again and again, with increasing concentration, as a kind of Zen text, until the words clattered around inside my head like the blades of a helicopter that could lift me high above the valley. I had no fly rod then and there

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were no trout in the nearby lakes. But my course was set, even though I went on fishing for pike and perch with spinners of every shape I could afford.

The countryside around Lilla Edet has been combed by glaciers from north to south; parallel valleys run through the granite. In the deepest and broadest of these, by the side of Lilla Edet, runs the Göta river, which drains Lake Vänern, one of the largest inland lakes in Europe, into the Kattegatt at Gothenburg on Sweden's south-west coast. To the east of the river lies a chain of deep, clear lakes. They are clearer than they should be, because of the acid rain. The furthest upstream was completely dead: you could see ten metres or more into its depths, coated with white algal slime. Nothing else lived to cloud the water. But two lakes further south, by the bathing place for Lilla Edet, was a lake whose depths were still a deep humus colour, whose margins were full of water lilies and whose weed beds were full of pike.

In Finland, early in the twentieth century, farmers were so poor they ate roach. Bream was a popular, or at least a common, food in rural Sweden; there are poems and songs about catching them in their spawning time – and I suppose they can't taste as bad as roach. Perch were, and remain, a delicacy, found in the best fish restaurants. But when I was poor and hungry, I ate pike.

The hardware shop in Lilla Edet sold red-and-white plastic floats for perch fishing: sturdy, buoyant devices even the most determined fish found hard to pull under. But I hated worms, and switched to spinning as soon as I could. Three or four days a week I would cycle up the vicious dusty hill that led into the woods just east of the town. I had a solid fibreglass rod about five feet long, in mineral green with white streaks, its brass-wire rod-rings lashed on with lumpy twine. With it came a closed-face

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reel from which stiff coils of 20lb line sprang out. The outfit cost about twelve pounds in *kronor*, which meant I could afford to change the line to something limper and less frightening.

Much of the lake was inaccessible. The eastern shore fell out of the forest in a broken line of granite cliffs ten or twenty feet high and a mile long. It could only be approached by boat. At each end, it was cut off from the rest of the shore by the bogs and streamlets that linked the chain of lakes. But the accessible, western side of the lake was rounded and scalloped with bays between seamed granite promontories. Within the seams were drifts of crunchy pine needles, but most of the granite was bare except for lichen. On hot days the beautiful desolate scent of pine clung to my fingers. There were paths through the forest for part of the way round, but they ran some distance from the water. If I wanted to fish, I stood on granite. Often I was the only person there; perhaps the only human for a mile around. If I caught one fish, it was supper for all of us. Fishing was the only way I could contribute anything to the economy of my girlfriend's family. She was working shifts in the paper mill; but I couldn't get a work permit. It was 1977. Anita was twenty and I was twenty-two. I could have left her to get on with her life. Instead I stayed, and went fishing.

It was almost always a waste of time to cast straight out. The water there was four or five metres deep. The fish were in the warm shallow margins, sheltered by lily pads. Plugs were difficult to cast and expensive, so I used spoons. The Swedish tackle firm ABU made perhaps twenty different types of pike spoon in those days, in six or seven colourings and weights: their catalogue of spoons, and plugs and spinners was enough to build a whole speculative universe around, like a fly box, except that spinning was more tactile. I could feel the different ways each lure moved in the water, and spent the hours when nothing bit

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working out patiently which speed seemed to bring the lure most to life. In the end, I settled on a fluttering, leaf-like motion, using an Atom spoon described as 'perch-coloured'. It was copper on one side, and on the other green and black dots mingled in stripes like a test for colour blindness; the larger sizes had a short red plastic tag at the rear that seemed to make a difference. Even through that terrible rod I could feel the twittering of the lure and could tell the difference between the knocks of a perch and the sudden, irreversible haul of a pike.

Very few fish that bit at all escaped. I kept my hooks meticulously sharpened, with a hunter's instinct, and these were simple pike. There are lakes in Sweden where no other species of fish is found, and the Hobbesian war of all against all is complete. Ours was not so savage, but the pike were still overcrowded and voracious. Every lily bed held some. Except on the hottest and stillest days, there was always at least one pike that could be teased or cajoled into striking. Most were not large: they could be coiled, decapitated, into the largest saucepan in the house. Really large ones were fried in fillets.

I cooked them with as much variety as I could, but it was an uphill struggle. In rural Sweden in the 1970s, potatoes marked the culinary seasons. The gradations involved were subtle: potatoes were eaten with every meal all through the year, and they were always boiled in their skins. But in summer, you ate new potatoes, peel and all. At some stage, as the autumn wore in, you reverted to peeling them at the table before eating them. Mashed potatoes were available, but only as a delicacy, from the hot-dog stand. It took me some months to learn the knack of peeling a scalding potato on the end of a fork; my girlfriend's father concluded from this that I was almost feeble-minded.

Some days, when Anita was working the early shift at the mill, I would rise with her rather than stay in the house and

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cycle to the lake in the hills. The last portion of the ride was downhill, through a meadow, and if I was early enough the mist would still be thick across it, so that, once, everything above my waist was gilded in the pale sunlight, and everything below choked and muffled in white. I freewheeled, as if I were flying through clouds above the surly bonds of earth. That day was bright and still, with the forest calm as a church. I caught nothing.

As the summer wore on, I fished and bicycled with a fierce devotion. As well as the bathing lake there were others on the western bank of the river, further away, but holding the promise of novelty, but their banks were too densely forested and boggy to be fishable at all. I don't want to overestimate the wildness of these woods: they were logged regularly and broken by frequent smallholdings. None the less, it would have been possible to travel from Lilla Edet to Lapland without ever leaving the forest except to cross roads; and, a couple of years later, a pack of six wolves was tracked from Russia, through Finland and Swedish Lapland, and then for a further 1,600 kilometres down the spine where Sweden and Norway are joined until one of them broke off, headed further south, and killed a sheep in a field just outside the town.

There were no such excitements in the pike summer. From Lilla Edet, you could only look north and south to the next bends in the great river. The sides of the valley rose like forested walls, cutting off the horizon, though the eastern side of the river was tamer, with a wider strip of fields. About eight kilometres north, a broad and sluggish tributary joined the Göta; and once at its mouth I lost two spinners and had a tremendous tussle with a large fish which also escaped. This was playing for stakes too high. I returned to the smaller lakes in the enclosing hills.