

# MYTHOLOGIZING THE SPORTSMAN: POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF FLY FISHING IN EARLY CANADA

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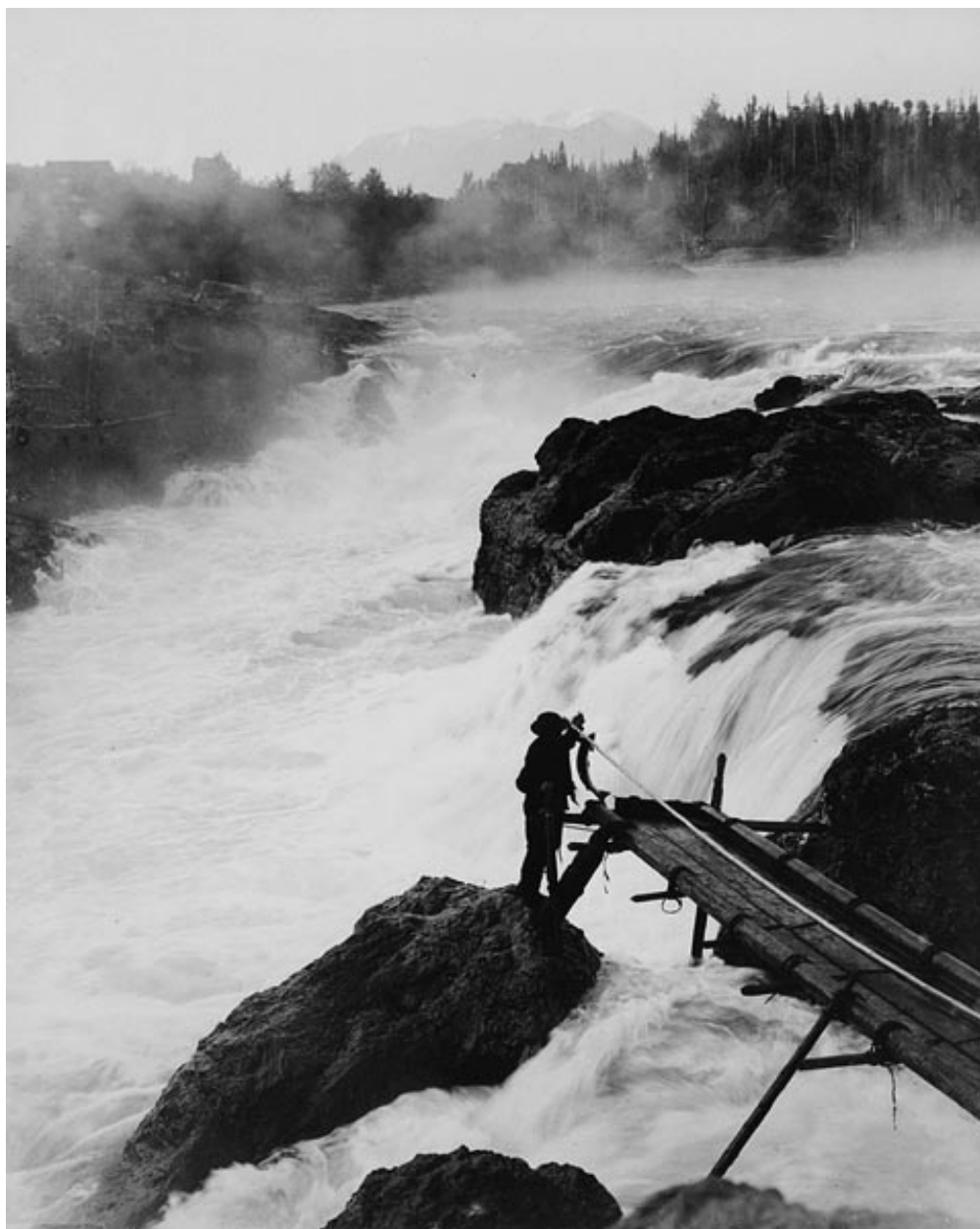
The mythology of the sportsman is the subject of this exhibition. The following images will illustrate the idealistic elements of this mythos in relation to identity politics in early Canada.

The idealization of the sportsman can be traced back to Izacc Walton's (1593-1683) *The Complete Angler: Or the Contemplative Man's Recreation* (1653).<sup>1</sup> In this text Walton writes a dialogue between a hunter (Venator) and a fisherman (Piscator) and through this conversation provides instruction of how to fish while explaining the sport as a site for quiet reflection.<sup>2</sup> This text, however, is also assumed to have a coded political message. Walton wrote the *Complete Angler* after the English Civil War. Scholars consider the *Complete Angler* to be an allegory that details proper Anglican behavior, since Walton was a devout Anglican.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the myth of the sportsman has a performative aspect from its early inception.

Canada has a long history of being promoted as a sportsman's paradise. From the founding of Confederation (1867) to 1908 the government spent in excess of three million dollars organizing and transporting displays about sporting activities to various world fairs.<sup>4</sup> The notion of the sportsman was important to early Canadian identity. This was publicized in many ways, from the government's advancement of tourism to private sector initiatives and writings, both by Canadians and about Canada, that appeared in newspapers, books, and magazines. The fact that Agnes Macdonald (1836 – 1920), the wife of John A. MacDonald (1815 – 1891), the first Prime

Minister of Canada, wrote an account of her experiences fly-fishing for salmon on the Restigouche River further illustrates this link.<sup>5</sup>

Class stratification, an active component of the promotion of the sportsman, was hidden in government policy and propaganda. The lower classes and First Nations fished commercially and for sustenance. This did not fit with the upper class ideologies of proper sportsmanship and fair play, so ethical superiority and environmental regulations were both deployed to elevate the status of the sportsman. Sporting magazines encouraged women to fish and hunt in order to suggest the gentility of these sport-based practices and their moral superiority in contrast to sustenance-based practices.<sup>6</sup> Both men and women were instrumental in defining the ideals of the Canadian sportsman. The images that follow explore the creation of the sportsman in our national heritage.



Salmon Fishing. 1903-1914

Artist Unknown

photograph ; 243 x 190 mm

Library and Archives Canada/3193625

[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3193625](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3193625)>.

This is a portrait of a sustenance fisherman netting salmon at the Moricetown Falls, on the Bulkley River near Smithers, British Columbia. The photograph depicts a method of fishing used by the First Nations in the region that is still practiced to this day. The subject of the picture is a shadow, and as such is not represented as an individual. His heritage is undetermined, but it is clear that he represents the lower class fisherman, and is an example of a person fishing in an “unsportsmanlike” manner.<sup>7</sup> In this period, when there were numerous photographs taken of men fishing, this image could be considered a portrait framed to capture the fisherman in his environment.<sup>8</sup> In this instance, the desire to recognize the pictured individual is denied because he is hidden in shadow. This in turn has a dehumanizing effect on the represented subject, which would have been consistent with the desire to demonize the lower class fishermen.



Trout Stream, P.E.I. Date Unknown

Artist Unknown

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada/3385842

[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3385842](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3385842)>.

By contrast this image is representative of the upper class, fly fisherman, who is therefore an ethical sportsman.<sup>9</sup> In the late 1800s and early 1900s, fly fishing clubs purchased access rights to rivers from Canada's Department of Indian Affairs. This limited the access to these waters by First Nations and lower class fishermen. The acts of access were phrased in such a way as to give the impression that Native interests were being taken into account because they supposedly "profited" from the deals. These leases excluded the lower classes through economic means by limiting land use to club members and paying tourists.





John Walsh & Co. 1870

14" x 20"

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006677472/>

This image shows men and women enjoying the sport of fishing. They are middle to upper class, and images like this were designed to promote the moral benefits of fishing in late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though this is an American image, similar type of images would have circulated in Canada as well.



A 4 1/2 lb Trout. Date unknown

William James Topley

Glass Plate Negative; 8 x 10 in.

Library and Archives Canada/3359167

[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3359167](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3359167)>.



This image of the fish and gear belonging to the photographer William James Topley (1845-1930) is a self-portrait as the ideal Canadian sportsman.<sup>10</sup> The subject of the photograph is obviously different from Topley's usual studio portraits; yet there is a similarity in the careful layout of his fly rod and creel, both essential accessories of the sportsman. These objects ensure that the viewer would see that the fish was caught by fly-fishing. This still-life image promotes Canada as a sportsman's paradise, because it shows that there are nice sized trout that are willing to take a fly. Rivers that these trout inhabited were regulated by fishing seasons and leased by fishing clubs.<sup>11</sup> This pretense of resource protection previously mentioned also limited First Nations' access to hunting in national parks.<sup>12</sup>



Two Trout Hanging from the Tent Pole. 1914

Tom Thomson

Cellulose nitrate ; 6.3 x 8.5 cm

Library and Archives Canada/3567511

<[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3567511](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3567511)>.

This is a photograph of the campsite of Tom Thomson (1877-1917), famous artist, associate of the Group of Seven, and quintessential Canadian sportsman. Like the Topley portrait, this image also has a fly rod and the resulting catch of fish to show that Thomson is an ethical sportsman. The romantic portrayal of the campsite in the context of a fishing excursion is reminiscent of how Izaak Walton communicates the practice of angling as a peaceful personal meditation. The fisherman as cultured is also expressed through Tom Thomson the artist as signifier of the Canadian sportsman. In *The Sportsman in Canada* Frederic Tolfrey (1795-?) writes about his experiences fly fishing in Canada. He recounts stories of numerous nights spent reciting plays or eating fine meals to demonstrate how cultured his hosts are.<sup>13</sup> The character of the sportsman as cultured is directly linked to his appreciation of the arts. In this photograph the image is modernized and made significant in relation to Canada because Tom Thomson is both a knowledgeable sportsman and a great artist.



Tom Thomson Fishing. Date unknown

Artist Unknown

Archives of Ontario Collection or Fond: William Colgate collection Reference Number:  
F 1066-6/10010312

<<http://reflectionsoutdoors.wordpress.com/2011/04/04/searching-for-toms-canoe-continued-tom-thomson-the-artist-and-the-canoe/>>.

This image is in the Ontario provincial archives and is of Tom Thomson fishing in his beloved Algonquin Park. It is a companion to the image of Thomson's campsite.





Trout Fishing in France. June, 1916

Canada. Dept. of National Defense

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada/3396673

[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3396673](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3396673)>.

Canada's Department of National Defence commissioned this final image of the exhibition. It is of an officer fly fishing in France, but its original purpose is not stated. Fly fishing has a long history of popularity with the officer class of British soldiers. Tolfrey's descriptions of well-bred military hosts exemplify this connection.<sup>14</sup> This was also true of the military in Canada,<sup>15</sup> where sport was thought to boost health and moral.<sup>16</sup> In 1917 the Canadian Army instituted conscription to deploy more men to the war effort in France.<sup>17</sup> Within this context, the established myth of the Canadian sportsman was used to attract recruits for the war effort by demonstrating that they can participate in noble sports, even though they are at war.



Fly fishing is still a very popular recreation today. Here is an image of me releasing a Steelhead I caught last winter on the Cowichan River in British Columbia. My enjoyment of fly fishing motivated me to create this exhibition and approach the topic from an art historical perspective.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent summary of the contents see film by Fritz Mitchell, *The Complete Angler*, ESPN Original Entertainment, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Izaak Walton, *The Complete Angler or the Contemplative Man's Recreation*, 1676, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed., Reprint, London: Bloomsbury Books, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> P. G. Stanwood, *Izaak Walton*, New York: Twayne (1998): 61.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Wamsley, "Good Clean Sport and a Deer Apiece: Game Legislation and State Formation in 19th Century Canada," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 25:2 (1994): 12.

<sup>5</sup> See Macdonald, of E. A. M., Peter Thomas, and Wilfred P. Carter, *On a Canadian Salmon River: Lady Agnes Macdonald's Account of Fishing the Retigouche in 1887*, Cambridge, Mass: Privately printed for C.B. Wood, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Andrea L. Smalley, "Our Lady Sportsmen: Gender Class, and Conservation in Sport Hunting Magazines, 1873-1920," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 4:4 (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Smalley, 5 and Wamsley, 3-6; Note that what I am suggesting here is related to the perception of fishing practices in this period and may not necessarily true for this specific photograph since the specifics of this photograph are not described in the on-line records of Library Archives Canada.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 25.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Hummel, *Hunting and Fishing for Sport: Commerce, Controversy, Popular Culture* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994) 46.

<sup>10</sup> William James Topley (2000) 25 Nov. 2011 <[http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\\_nbr=8390](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=8390)>.

<sup>11</sup> Wamsley, 3-4; For an example of a river lease, see *NORTHEASTERN SUPERINTENDENCY - CORRESPONDENCE REGARDING THE PROPOSED LEASING, TO MR. T.F. KEARY, OF FLY FISHING RIGHTS IN THE NEPISQUIT RIVER WHICH RUNS THROUGH THE INDIAN RESERVE IN GLOUCESTER COUNTY*, Red Series- Headquarters central registry system Vol. Library and Archives Canada, 1890-1891.

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=157497&back\\_url=\(\)](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=157497&back_url=())>.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Binnema and Melanie Niemi, "'Let the Line Be Drawn Now': Wilderness, Conservation, and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada," *Environmental History* 11:4 (2006): 724, 729-30.

<sup>13</sup> Frederic Tolfrey, *The Sportsman in Canada*, London: T.C. Newby (1845) *Open Library*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> It is an interesting coincidence that Frederic Tolfrey also wrote a book called *The Sportsman in France*. Where he details his fishing and hunting adventures in France in a similar way to those he had in Canada.

<sup>15</sup> Tolfrey, 62 and 107.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Manning, *Recreating Man: Hunting and Angling in Victorian Canada*, M.A., Carleton University (1994): 54.

<sup>17</sup> A. M. Willms, "Conscription, 1917: a Brief for the Defense," *Canadian Historical Review* 37:4 (1956): 338, 342-47.

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<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=157497&back\\_url=\(\)](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=157497&back_url=())>.

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<<http://reflectionsoutdoors.wordpress.com/2011/04/04/searching-for-toms-canoe-continued-tom-thomson-the-artist-and-the-canoe/>>.

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## LESSON PLAN

For children in elementary school: After viewing the exhibition the children will be asked to tie a simple fly (pattern called the Woolly Bugger). The technique will be demonstrated and instructions provided. The pattern is provided here.

Hook: 2X long streamer hook size 10

Tail: Marabou and Krystal flash

Rib: copper wire

Body: chenille (colour to match tail)

Hackle: rooster saddle (colour to match or contrast body)

Thread: Black 6/0



Image from <http://www.west-fly-fishing.com/fly-pattern-recipe/wet/woollybugger.shtml>

For high school age children: I would like to have Alexandra Morton explain the dangers and impacts of farmed salmon on wild fish populations. The students will then be split into groups and discuss how this information would impact their daily lives. They would then be responsible for proposing a way to help alleviate the issue. The main goal here is to spread awareness on this issue that is decimating wild anadromous fish populations. For further information on this see

<http://alexandramorton.typepad.com/>