“A Recreation Which Many Ladies Delight In”: Establishing a Tradition of Fisherwomen in Britain and North America Prior to the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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The coolness of the morning air that lingered from the previous day’s rainstorm left a lasting impression on a trio of anglers as they embarked upon a day of fishing in the spring of 1768. Despite the chill in the air and the dampness of the ground, the fishing turned out to be so good, with everyone catching great quantities of carp, perch, and even “one enormous eel,” that the three decided to return that evening to continue the adventure. With the weather now clear, the three “angled & caught carp, perch and roch,” amidst a backdrop filled with the chorus of songbirds and the perfume of honeysuckles. Later that night, one of the anglers “supped upon fish,” and reflected on “a great fishing” in “the pleasantest time of the Year,” thus bringing to completion a most perfect and wonderful angling experience.

This was the experience of Lady Mary Campbell Coke, an avid and accomplished eighteenth-century fisherwoman who was the youngest daughter of John Campbell, the second Duke of Argyll.1 Her companions on that Monday morning in May, 1768, were her sister, Anne Campbell, Countess of Strafford, and a Mrs. Jackson, each of whom also enjoyed the sport of angling.2 It is the intention of this essay to demonstrate that female angling forays such as this were not uncommon in either Britain or North America prior to the mid-nineteenth century, at which time women’s participation in the sport increased and became more publicly pronounced.3 As Nicholas D. Smith asserts in his pioneering work “Reel Women: Women and Angling in Eighteenth-Century England” (2003), “Although the evidence is fragmentary and the sources diverse, it is still possible to present some idea of the female involvement in the sport, the reasons for its attractions to them, and the male response to their involvement.” Therefore, this study will build on Smith’s framework of evidence to further establish a defined female tradition of angling.

For whether on the banks of a purling English stream or from the bow of a boat, elite women of British descent have fished alongside men and independently of men for centuries. Moreover, because it was historically intertwined within the fabric of everyday domestic life as both a means of sustenance and leisure, angling maintained for itself an unassuming appearance that provided a canopy of camouflage under...
which elite Early Modern women could find access to nature and where they could achieve a level of autonomy and agency. What is particularly interesting is how the image of the fisherwomen was interpreted by male writers of the Renaissance to be an acceptable embodiment of masculine notions of female sexuality and virtue, while for some elite women, it represented a means of mobility to extend or move beyond the limitations of the domestic dwelling. Subsequently, angling may best be described as a complex cultural phenomenon where a multiplicity of reasons for participation, both conscious and unconscious, came together in the form of an outwardly simple recreational activity. Thus, there was a hidden nature to angling that supported the visible canopy of practicality and enjoyment. As this study will argue, it was through this structure that angling became an established and accepted activity for elite British women who, through emigration and travel, would bring this tradition to North America long before the mid-nineteenth century.

The emergence of angling as an acceptable recreation for elite women lies in its roots as a premodern, preindustrial British field sport and its association with the virtues of gentleness, patience, contemplation, and Christian devotion. As Carl-Petter Sjovold notes in his chapter on early angling literature, “it was common for angling writers to begin their books with a brief statement on the virtues of angling—a statement that often referred to a number of scriptural passages affirming the sanctity of the sport.” Furthermore, angling did not, as hunting did, claim itself to be “a form of exercise which prepared ‘Heroes and Princes’ for the tasks of defending their countries, protecting their subjects, and maintaining justice.” By contrast, angling “appears as a sport more conducive to social and physiological harmony,” and “fell ‘within the capacity of the lowest fortune’ and directed one’s thoughts toward the ‘noblest studies.’” Concerning this benign nature of angling, Donald Wetherell and Irene Kmet observe that “fishing seemed less aggressive, more contemplative, and crossed all social lines: ‘all ages, all sexes, all professions and all trades have their representatives among those who fish.’ It could be undertaken with simple equipment and little or no training.” Hence, angling’s historic distance from the physicality, violence, and power structures of other sports lent itself toward a more heterogeneous constituency.

Angling’s acceptability for elite women may also be attributed to the traditional, though spurious, inclusion of a woman as the originator of modern sport angling. Though Dame Juliana Berners’s authorship of *The Treatyse of Fyshhyng wyth an Angle* (1496) has been contested by medieval angling historians such as Richard Hoffman, it does not necessarily diminish Berners’s legacy as the matriarch of modern sport fishing. For, even if Berners was not the author of the *Treatyse*, the persistent and early historic tradition that she was the author, would still appear “to put women squarely into the fishing picture almost from the start.” This is important because the publication of the *Treatyse* in 1496 marked a significant milestone in the evolution of English angling literature. The coup of the *Treatyse* was that it was able to compile previously known information and instructions on angling technique into a form that seemed geared toward “a leisured and sophisticated class.” Originally an addendum onto the widely popular hunting and hawking manual, the *Boke of St. Alban’s*, that was published in 1486, the *Treatyse*, compared the claims of fishing with “hunting (too laborious), hawking (too chancy) and fowling (too cold).” Most significantly, the *Treatyse* reflected a societal trend toward a wider acceptance of leisure activities that had begun in the