A History of the Landing Net

by Frederick Buller

Figure 1. This portion of a mosaic from the first or second century A.D., one of many revealed by Italian excavations, was found in a Roman seaside villa called the Villa del Nilo. The Roman net depicted is similar to modern landing nets. Reproduction by permission of the Illustrated London News Picture Library.

Early students of angling history would probably have imagined that the landing net was a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century European invention. That was until Alfred Joshua Butler, author of *Sport in Classic Times* (1930),[1] wrote an article, "Roman Fishing Methods Revealed in Mosaics," for *The Illustrated London News.* Butler's information, published in September 1934, was gleaned from an account written by Professor Guidi and published in *Africa Italiana* (January–July 1933). The account described a dig in North Africa on the site of Leptis Magna, in a former Roman colony that is now Tripoli.

The discovery at Leptis Magna by Italian archaeologists of a mosaic depicting an angling scene indicates that landing nets were used in antiquity. The mosaic portrays two Roman anglers, one of whom is baiting his hook while the other is landing a fish (Figure 1). The latter holds an approximately 7-foot rod high above his shoulder with his left hand while drawing the fish toward the landing net with his right hand.

The knowledge that a modern-type triangular landing net was used by Romans nearly 2,000 years ago is extraordinary enough, but Butler also came across a reference to an even earlier triangular, albeit handleless, landing net of Egyptian origin. It was a detail shown in a fishing scene in bas-relief on stone carved some 5,000 years ago. He found it, or rather a line drawing of it (Figure 2), in J. J. M. de Morgan's *Recherches sur les origines de l'Egypte.*[2] The bas-relief had been discovered in the tomb of Mera, at Saqqarah, and dates from 2600 to 2750 B.C.

The inference we draw from Butler's article is that the Roman triangular net found by the Italian archaeologists at the site of Leptis Magna is a modified example or a development of an earlier Egyptian landing net.[3] Incidentally, Butler corresponded with the historian William Radcliffe following his discoveries, and Radcliffe admitted that he had no knowledge of either of these ancient landing nets.

After the Romans, we enter a dark age. There is no mention of hand-held nets until Walter Skeat, a Cambridge University–based historian and etymologist, translated a late tenth- or early eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon list of fish names that included a reference to a *boga net,* which he translated into modern English as a bow net.[4]

A Scottish reference to the landing net appears in *Wallace,*[5]

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a fifteenth-century text described by medieval historian Richard C. Hoffmann as "a quasihistorical Scots epic."[6] *Wallace,* "probably written in 1476–78, depicts the career of the first hero of Scottish resistance, William Wallace (c. 1270–1305)."[7] The young Wallace, later to become Sir William Wallace, was fishing the River Irvine in Ayrshire in southwest Scotland and had landed five fish,[8] when along came a band of Lord Percy's men. (Percy was the governor or captain of the English military occupation.) They demanded the total catch for their lord. A fight ensued at a ford crossing at Puddlie-deidlie.[9] Wallace had left his sword at home and so defended himself with his poutstaff[10] or landing-net handle. Having clouted his first opponent on the cheek and taken his sword, Wallace proceeded (as a hero would) to kill three of Percy's men, or "Southroners" as the Scots called them, before putting the others to flight.[11]

The next mention of the landing net, together with an illustration, appeared in *Dyalogus Creaturarum Optime Moralizatus,* a Latin work published in 1480.[12] This woodcut of a man using a landing net (Figure 3) is not strictly illustrative of an angling situation, although other woodcuts in the book are. Among these is the earliest known illustration of an angler using a float.[13]

From a whole raft of papers and drawings reproduced and kindly handed over to me by Richard C. Hoffmann, it would appear that we must look to the literature of other countries in Europe for evidence of widespread use of the landing net during the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. Indeed, in the frontispiece of Hoffmann's latest book, *Fisher's Craft and Lettered Art* (University of Toronto Press, 1997), is a reproduction of a woodcut depicting two fishermen, one of whom is wielding a huge bow net (Figure 4). The illustration came from a booklet, *Die kunst wie man fisch und vögel fahren soll,* which Hoffmann estimates was published (based on the style of the woodcut) sometime during the 1530s or 1540s. If the net handle was detachable, and had such a handle been available to Wallace, it is easy to imagine its utility as a weapon.

From the extensive material on landing nets that Hoffmann gave me, it is obvious that a comprehensive trawl through the records of all the European countries would take many years. Accordingly, I have picked out two landing nets in illustration to represent the fifteenth to sixteenth-century period (Figures

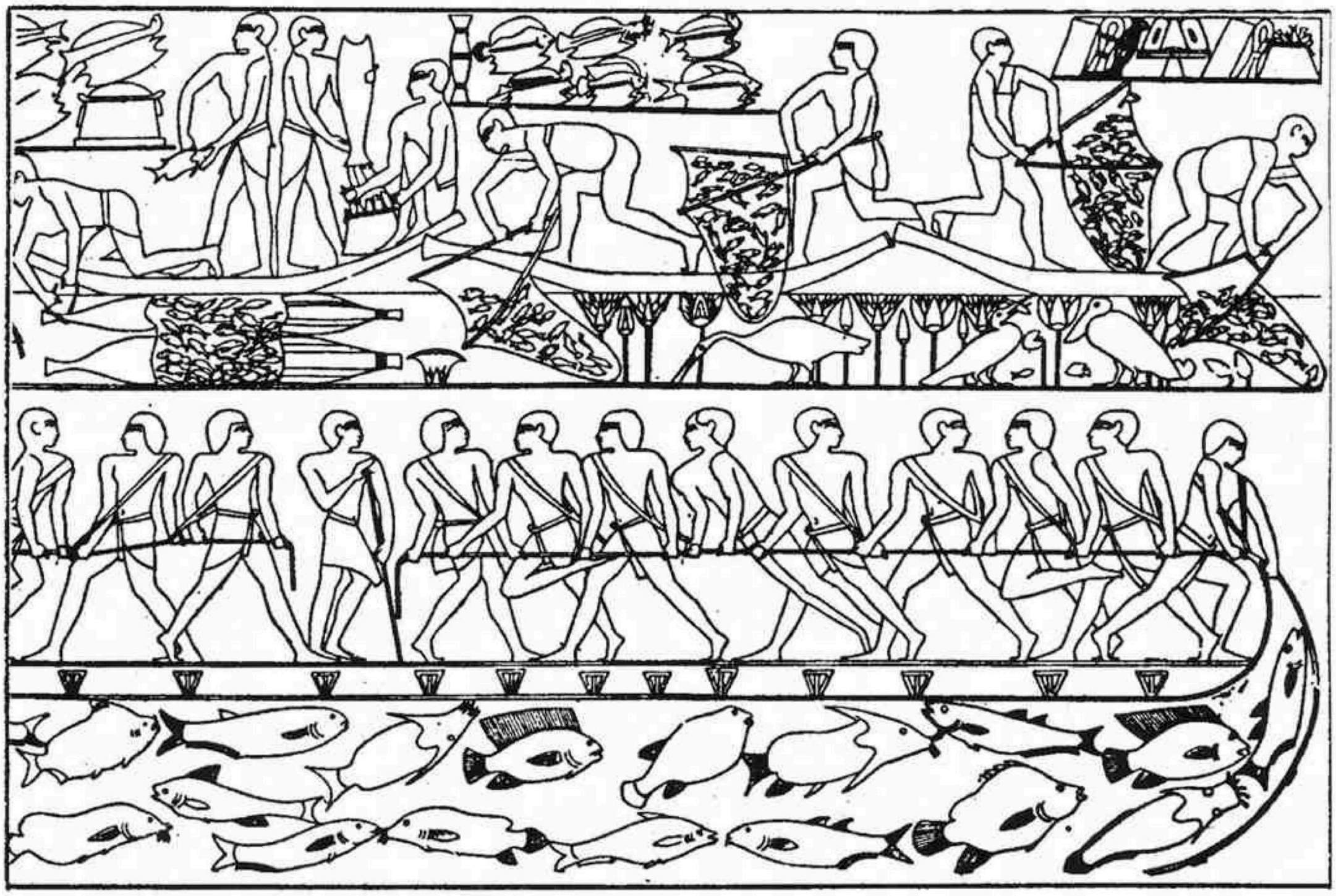

Figure 2. Four examples of a handleless triangular-type landing net can be seen in the upper frame of this Egyptian fishing scene, which dates from c. 2600 to 2750 B.C. Reproduced by permission of the Illustrated London News Picture Library.

Figure 3. This woodcut from Dyalogus Creaturarum Optime Moralizatus *is not strictly illustrative of angling, but it shows the clear use of a net to land fish. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library.*

Figure 4. Landing net from a woodcut in Die kunst wie man fisch, *published in the 1530s or 1540s. Illustration reproduced by kind permission of Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (ref. Uzn 25 508b).*

5 and 6). After inspecting all the material, I am persuaded there were probably parallel advances made in tackle and fishing/angling methods in most countries where travelers were constantly exchanging ideas.

Hints at the existence of a landing net are to be found in one of the earliest fishing books printed in the English language, *The Arte of Angling* (1577), attributed to William Samuel. In this didactic volume, which was probably the model for Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler,* published seventy-six years later, Piscator (the experienced angler) is teaching Viator (the pupil) the ways of fish and the ploys of fishermen. Piscator hooks a good perch and, after playing it out, tells Viator to lie down on his belly, hold the bank with one hand, and take the fish with the other by putting his forefinger into the gills and the thumb into its mouth.

As soon as the perch is landed, Viator, aglow with sudden and unexpected justification for his presence, asks: "How would you have done it if I had not been here?" In a lengthy reply, Piscator tells his pupil that it had been his intention to fish the swim for roach, and, in accordance with that intention, had brought only roach gear with him. He finished thus: "I . . . left one of my tooles at home for hast, whiche if I had brought, I could have landed him without your help."[14] From this, it is evident that a landing net of some kind was implied.

In *The Secrets of Angling* (1613), John Dennys starts what he calls his first book (that is, first chapter) by describing the basic tools (tackle) needed by an angler: rod, line, float, and hooks. He then lists the essential supplementary angling tools, including a linewinder, plummet, bait box, creel, and finally a landing net:

> A little Net that on a Pole shall stand,
> The mighty Pike or heavy Carpe to Land.[15]

Dennys then describes how a powerful carp is dealt with:

> Loe how he leads and guides him with his hands,
> Least that his line should breake or Angle rend,
> Then with a Net see how at last he lands,
> A mighty Carpe and has him in the end.[16]

The next important illustration of a landing net appears in Frère François Fortin's French angling classic, *Les ruses innocentes* (1660), shown in Figure 7. Fortin's book is full of splendid diagrams illustrating most of the known methods for taking all kinds of wild animals with hook, net, trap, and snare. John Waller Hills, in *A History of Fly Fishing for Trout* (1921), indicated that much of Fortin's work was original, including the first illustration of both the eyed hook and the *triangular* landing net. With the discovery of the depictions of Roman and Egyptian triangular landing nets, we can see that the normally reliable Hills was wrong about the dates of that first illustration.

Another of our treasured angling historians, W. J. Turrell, having read Richard Blome's *The Gentleman's Recreation* (1686), was mistaken when he observed in *Ancient Angling Authors* (1910) that "the only new method described in the angling portion is the following elaborate and ingenious method of carp fishing."[17] Well, Blome's method of carp fishing was a straight lift from Fortin's book, as was his description of the trian-

Figure 5. A woodcut showing fish being caught by net, spear, rod, and trap. From Petrus de Crescentiis'Weydtwergk *(1530).*

Figure 6. A woodcut showing fishermen using seine, bow, and dip nets. From Versch Arten des Fischfangs *(1583).*

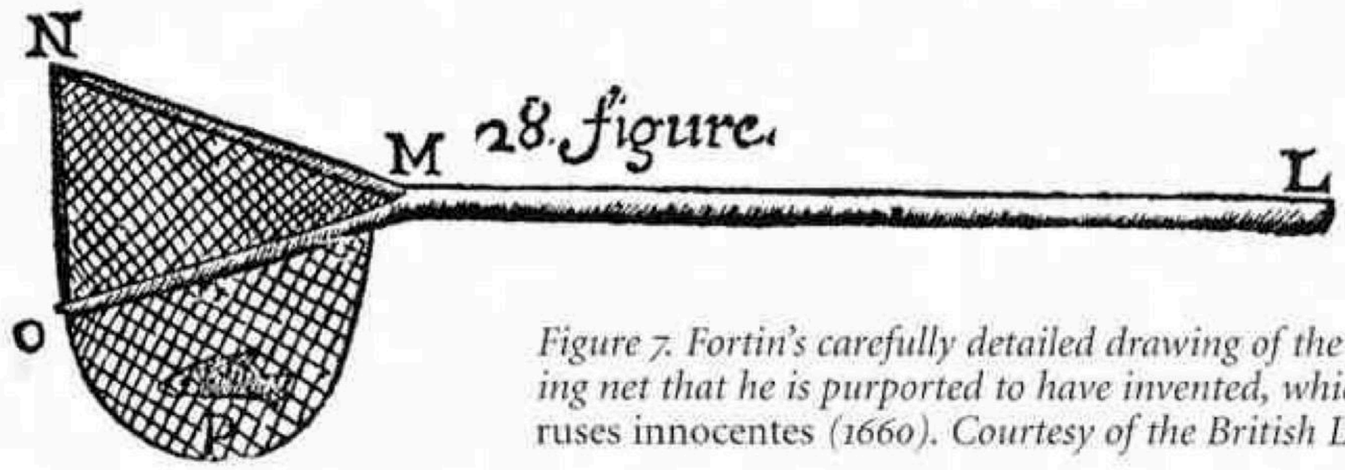

Figure 7. Fortin's carefully detailed drawing of the triangular landing net that he is purported to have invented, which appeared in Les ruses innocentes *(1660). Courtesy of the British Library.*

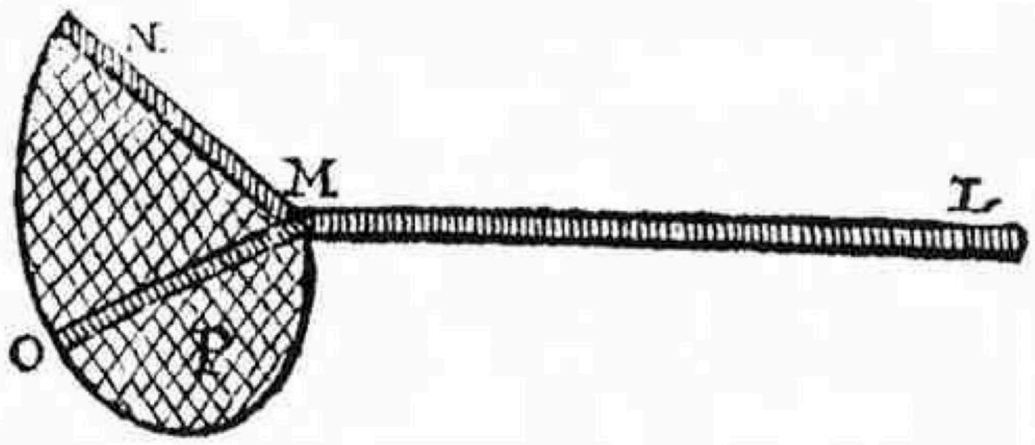

Figure 8. Blome's poor copy of Fortin's drawing. Courtesy of the British Library.

gular landing net—the only difference being that in copying Fortin's diagram of the latter (Figure 8), he (or his artist) couldn't accurately visualize the pattern that a hanging net would make.

Thomas Best, in the fourth edition of *A Concise Treatyse on the Art of Angling* (1798), in a list of items "most necessary for an angler to have with him," includes "a landing net, to land large fish with, and which are made with joints to fold up in a small compass [Is this the first mention of a triangular net that folds down or, as the author puts it, "with joints to fold up," like modern nets?]."[18]

In recent years, it is becoming more evident that many tackle items—such as the reel (and ipso facto rod rings), the jointed rod, the eyed hook, the spade end hook, and the landing net—are not modern inventions. For reasons unknown, earlier versions were lost to mankind for long periods before being reinvented during the modern era. I suspect, however, that some—like the landing net—have in reality enjoyed an unbroken history of use, even if the historical record has been lost.

ENDNOTES

1. Alfred Joshua Butler, *Sport in Classic Times* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930); reprinted with a foreword by Roderick Haig-Brown (Los Altos, Calif.: William Kaufmann, 1975).

2. J. J. M. de Morgan, *Recherches sur les origines de l'Egypte* (Paris: 1897). British Library shelfmark 7701662.

3. Butler noted that "the Italian archeologists at Leptis, with all their zeal and learning, seem totally unaware of the absorbing interest of their discovery to the angling world."

4. Walter Skeat, "Anglo-Saxon Fish-Names" *The Angler's Note-Book and Naturalist's Record*, vol. 11, (15 June 1880), pp. 168–70.

5. Attributed to Blind Harry (or Hary the Minstrel). Excerpted from Richard Hoffmann, "Fishing for Sport in Medieval Europe: New Evidence," *Speculum*, vol. 60, no. 4 (1985), p. 884.

6. Richard Hoffmann, "Fishing for Sport in Medieval Europe: New Evidence," *Speculum*, vol. 60, no. 4 (1985), p. 885.

7. Hoffmann, "Fishing for Sport," p. 886.

8. Because the word *fish* appears six times in the text, and knowing that in Scotland, the word is synonymous with salmon, we must assume that he had netted five salmon. That a Scottish hero should fish for anything other than salmon is unlikely in the extreme. Besides the dubiousness of a hero fighting for the sake of a few small fish, the only prospect when you push or draw a net along the bottom is to catch small fish, as only small ones can be overtaken by the net's thrust. The fish may have been taken in a trap or by an earlier version of the Scottish haaf-net. Haaf-netting is still practiced on the Solway Firth, where a net some 18 feet wide is held by a fisherman who faces the incoming tide. Migrating salmon running up the tidal reaches of a river swim up the shallower sides to avoid the faster flow of the center. The moment a fish hits the net, the haaf-netter raises his net to encircle it, clubs it with his priest while it is still enmeshed, and then pokes it into his shoulder bag.

Irvine's custom records (1519–1522) reveal that salmon and herrings were exported and that "ther is plentey of salmons takin in this river" (John Strawhorn's *The History of Irvine*, [Edinburgh: John Donald, Ltd., 1986], p. 12).

9. The curious name of the crossing may be a corruption of *pas de dieu* (the holy steps); that is, the stepping stones used by the Carmelite friars on their way to church.

10. A poutnet, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "a small conical net with a semicircular mouth, the flat end of which is pushed or drawn along the bottom of a stream by means of a long pole or staff, the poutstaff, a net not unlike the Anglo-Saxon bow net," and it is probably an earlier version or variation of the Scottish haaf-net. (The poutnet surely developed from the Anglo-Saxon bow net.) Alternatively, a poutnet could have been used to remove salmon from a trap.

11. A full account of this incident can be found in Robert Blakley's *Historical Sketches* (London: 1856), pp. 39–42.

12. An English translation, *The Dialogue of Creatures Moralyzed*, a copy of which is in the British Museum, was assigned a conjectural date of 1520. The image of an angler float fishing was taken from a copy from the Bodleian Library, catalogued Douce C271 and dated 1530.

13. The Bodleian Library at Oxford, Ref: Douce C271. *The Dialoges of Creatures Moralysed, 1530.* Woodcut on sig. Oliv verso of angling.

14. William Samuel, *The Arte of Angling (1577)* (facsimile edition) (Ashburton, Devon: The Flyfisher's Classic Library, 2000), pp. 25–27.

15. John Dennys, *The Secrets of Angling* (1613), quoted from reprint edition (London: W. Satchell & Co., 1883), p. 30.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

17. W. J. Turrell, *Ancient Angling Authors* (London: Gurney & Jackson, 1910), p. 143.

18. Thomas Best, *A Concise Treatyse on the Art of Angling*, 4th ed. (London: B. Crosby, 1798), p. 15.