

Books from Many Angles

Curating a collection of angling books takes JUSTIN HANISCH to the headwaters of the collecting experience and unleashes a new wave of enthusiasm.

ONE MORNING, SHORTLY AFTER waking, my partner of many years informed me that she had a dream about books. In her dream, Brienne was at a thrift store browsing the hardcovers. She pulled a large, heavy book off the shelf and quickly recognized it as a Gutenberg Bible. Proud and excited, Brienne bought the book for a few dollars and brought it home.

This is one of my favourite anecdotes as a book collector. I take for granted that my own life is consumed by thoughts of books and collecting, but occasionally something external—such as when my partner dreams of finding a Gutenberg Bible in a thrift store—attests to the significance of books in my life. Their importance was again apparent when I was invited to curate an exhibition of antiquarian angling books at the University of Alberta's world-class Bruce Peel Special Collections. But first, a little context.

I have collected books for over half of my 35 years.¹ I began collecting seriously in high school, but I have much earlier memories of my deep connection with books. I remember eagerly awaiting the Scholastic book fairs held each year in elementary school and visiting the local bookstore to scan the shelves for the latest instalment in the addictive *Goosebumps* series. Although I loved spending time among the shelves in the school library, I checked out books infrequently because I could scarcely part with them when they came due.

Aside from my nearly complete run of *Goosebumps*, I must have been around 12 or 13 when I began building my first collection: books about fishing. At first, any book about fishing would do, and I would delight in visiting local used bookstores, the twice-yearly Michigan Antiquarian Book Fair (although, I also had to suffer slights from dealers who had no time for a young collector with a presumed meagre budget), and the large warehouses that sold remaindered books. Most of the

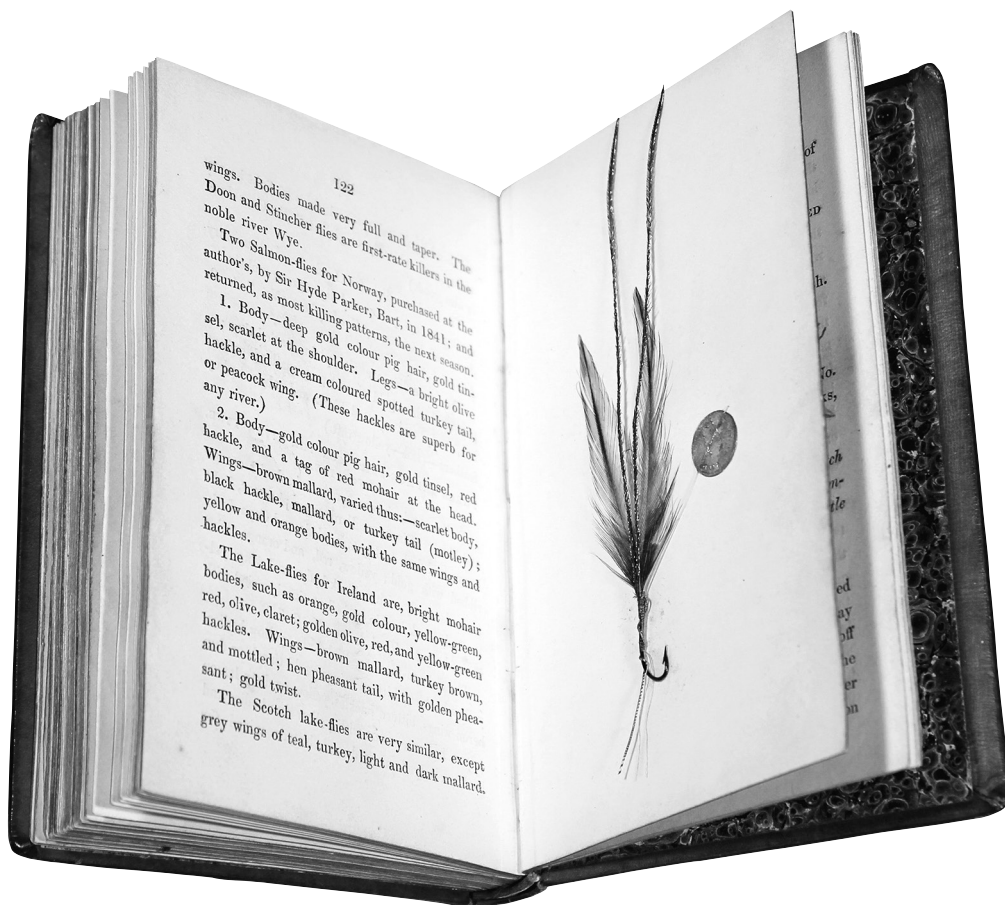
gifts I received for many years were new, used, or sometimes antiquarian, fishing books.

As I grew older, I started to think more about *why* and *what* I was buying, motivated by a nascent understanding that a good collection should be focused, thoughtful, and carefully assembled. In middle school, my collection included any fishing book I could find, but in high school, I was buying American fishing books published before 1901. I bought books eagerly but the market for antiquarian fishing books was competitive and in university I pivoted away from fishing books to focus my collection on books about the natural and social history of fish printed before 1901. I am an aquatic ecologist whose interest in fishing has always been motivated by a deep interest in the fish themselves, so this change in focus felt natural. Indeed, books on fish have been the core of my collection for the last decade (with a few satellite collections, of course), and I anticipate I will continue to collect fish books until forces beyond my control stop me.

TRANSFORMATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

My collection of fish books was also my entrée into a transformative relationship with Bruce Peel Special Collections at the University of Alberta. Like many young book collectors, I collected in relative isolation for years before meeting another serious collector of any age. In 2010, I e-mailed special collections while a graduate student in ecology at the university, to inquire after volunteer opportunities and hopefully make the acquaintance of some fellow collectors. I quickly received a positive response from Robert Desmarais, head of special collections and archives. Coincidentally, and shortly afterwards, I was awarded first place in the second annual National Book Collecting Contest for Young Canadians Under 30.²

After this win, I curated an online exhibition of my collection for the library to coincide with



An 1843 edition of Blacker's Catechism of Fly Making, Angling and Dyeing. Comprising most essential Information.

some media coverage of the contest. This was my first experience curating an exhibition, and I loved it! Over the next few years, I remained in contact with Robert and in 2016 he presented me with an opportunity to curate an exhibition of the extensive Bruce P. Dancik Collection of Angling Books. I knew Bruce as a collector and was already familiar with some of the thousands of books he had donated to the university. I had just completed my thesis defense, and the prospect of immediately starting another large project was daunting. But, with the encouragement of my partner and the excitement of another rare book adventure, I responded to Robert's invitation with an enthusiastic "Yes!" My second foray into curatorship had begun.

Bruce Peel Special Collections is known for award-winning exhibitions and catalogues, and I felt the weight of responsibility to do justice both to the collection and the library. However,

like Bruce Dancik, I am a scientist and an angler and have also collected fishing books for a time (albeit at a much humbler scale). Although I was a bit apprehensive—and intimidated—to accept this responsibility, I was also confident that I had the foundational knowledge needed to identify and describe the collection's important and interesting items.

My first step as curator was to take a deep dive into the collection. I was fortunate that most of the books donated to date had been catalogued, and I was able to view an online record of each book in the collection. After this digital review, I began to assemble lists of titles to examine in person during research visits to the library. The collection contains many of the most significant items from the Western canon of angling literature, and I knew I wanted to exhibit many of these items. However, the collection also contains scarce uncatalogued ephemera, uncommon titles

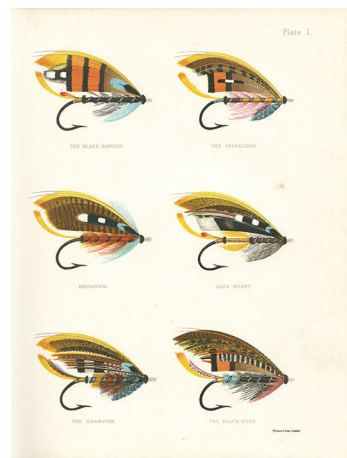
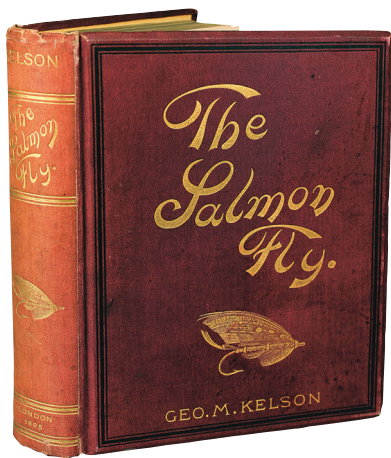


Many books in the collection contained attractive plates.

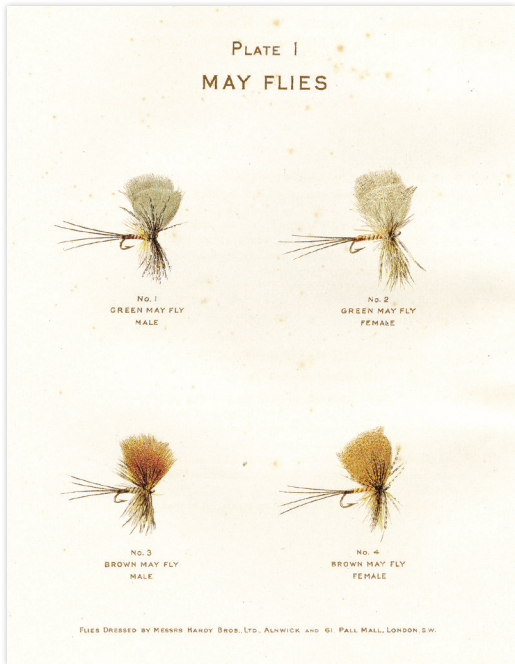
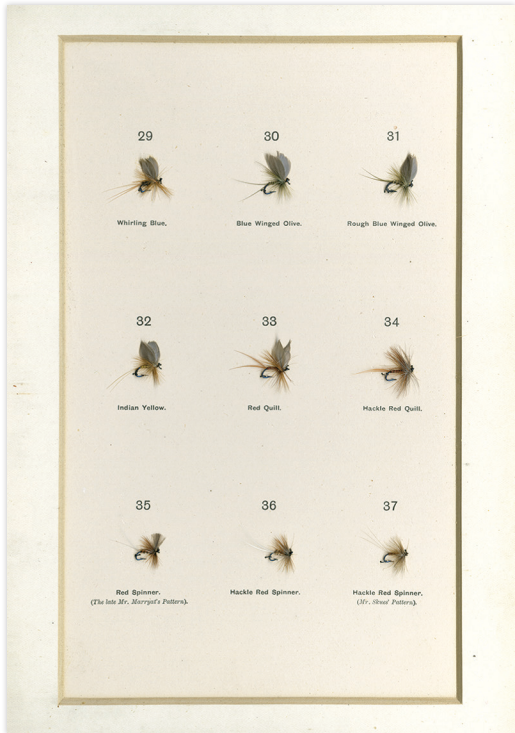
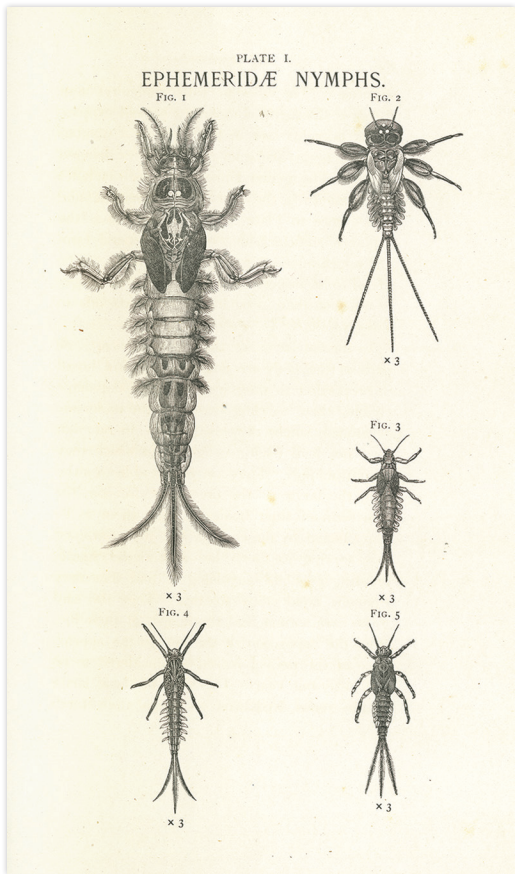
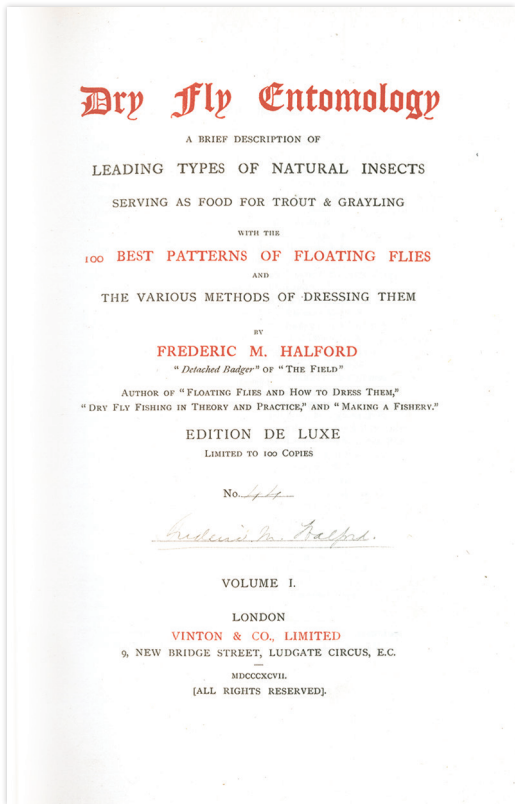
related to Canadian angling, and a fantastic run of extravagant limited editions, many of which were issued with hand-tied flies. I wished to exhibit these items as well but as I continued to compile lists of books to view in person the logical organization of such diverse content remained elusive.

Two book trucks filled with my requests greeted me at my first research visit to special collections, and I was immediately impressed by the quality of the books. The hand-tied flies in the 1843 edition of *Blacker's Catechism of*

Fly-making were like new, and the collection contained the highly limited seminal works on dry fly fishing by Frederick Halford that also included hand-tied flies. After viewing the “obvious” highlights, I turned to box after box of uncatalogued ephemera. Bruce collected thousands of pieces of ephemera, understanding their scarcity and the importance of preserving items that typically were not intended to be kept. I encountered several colourful railway brochures advertising fishing trips on Canadian



The Salmon Fly: How to Dress It and How to Use It (1895).



Pages from an 1897 edition of *Dry Fly Entomology: A Brief Description of Leading Types of Natural Insects Serving as Food for Trout & Grayling: With the 100 Best Patterns of Floating Flies and the Various Methods of Dressing Them, that included hand-tied flies.*

rail lines, uncommon guides to angling in Alberta and the Rocky Mountain national parks, and other pamphlets held in the collections of only a few other institutional libraries.

After my first few research visits, themes began to emerge from the larger collection. I began to imagine the collection as a great river with several braided channels. Each channel represented a “sub-theme” in the collection, unique and contained within its own banks but still united by a continuity of flow. The themes began to resolve as I handled more of the books: *Manuals and Handbooks*, *Limited Editions*, *Angling as Adventure*, *Scientific Angling*, and *Canadian Angling*. These themes would be the final organisational framework for both the physical exhibition and catalogue.

Once the themes were settled, I began the difficult task of choosing the final 100 or so titles to be featured in the catalogue and exhibition. Many of the most important books in the collection contained hand-tied flies or attractive plates, which lent themselves naturally to exhibition.



A diverse range of books on fishing were exhibited together to illustrate the characteristics of a thoughtful collection.

Others had decorative publisher’s bindings (*The Salmon Fly: How to Dress It and How to Use It*, 1895) or beguiling formats (*A Book of Small Flies*, 1983), which would garner immediate appreciation. However, some books were significant for reasons less amenable to display, such as 19th-century admonitions against overfishing (*The Salmon Fisheries of the St. Lawrence and Its Tributaries*, 1857) or an early description of fishing for the muskellunge, an enormous freshwater fish native to only a few regions in Canada and the United States (*The Sportsman in Canada*, 1845).

The challenges of exhibiting some of these titles still troubled me, but once the final text was delivered to the team in special collections my work was largely finished, and the true professionals took charge. Both the physical exhibition and catalogue exceeded anything I imagined, and each book was allowed to tell its story, demonstrate its position within each theme, and show its importance within the collection as a whole. Legendary rarities such as Dean Sage’s *The Ristigouche and Its Salmon Fishing* (1888) and John Hills’ *A Summer on the Test* (1924) shared exhibition space with ephemeral publications on fishing in Edmonton (*The Edmonton Trout Fishing Club Fishing Guide*, 1974) and Jasper (*Fishing in Jasper*, 1947). Books with diverse content, age, production, and traditional collectability were exhibited together to illustrate the characteristics of a thoughtful collection. Not every piece must be a rarity, but within a larger context, each title



A Book of Small Flies (1983).

should be chosen to add depth, breadth—and ultimately—importance to a collection.

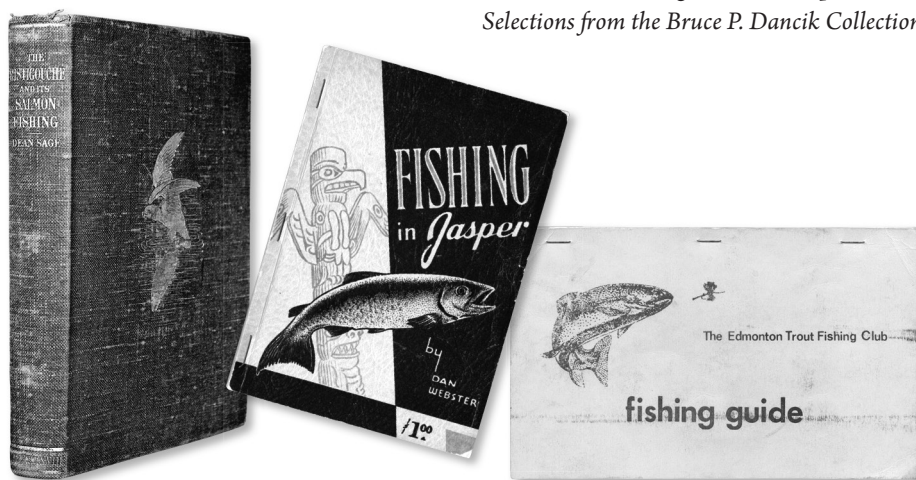
The exhibition's opening night was a celebration of books, collecting, and fishing that will remain with me for many years. The physical exhibition followed the layout of the catalogue. Books from each of the five themes were displayed together, and the books were arranged chronologically from oldest to newest. Thus, within each theme, the viewer could trace the progress in, for example, the scientific treatment of angling, the increasing quality in the depiction of aquatic insects and fishing flies, or the complexity in production of limited edition titles. Seeing these books that I had handled, read, photographed and, yes, befriended exhibited behind glass reinforced the responsibility and privilege I was given to work with the collection. It also highlighted the vital role that collectors play in gathering and preserving books. As I toured the exhibition and chatted with attendees at the opening, I felt content and proud. I was proud of the books—both of them and *for* them. I felt pride for Bruce for assembling an important collection and for working with the University of Alberta to preserve it. I was also proud that I had played a part in sharing what makes the books and the collection significant.

FRESH ENTHUSIASM

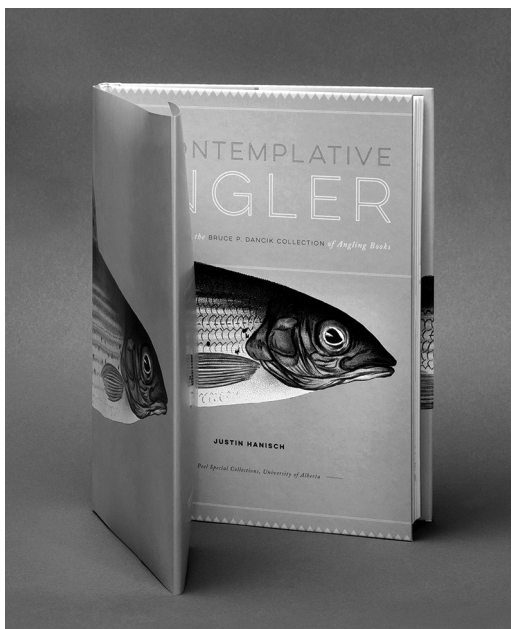
Working with the university on this project redoubled my commitment to my own collection.

What Bruce and his partner, Brenda Laishley, have accomplished has stoked my passions and inspired me to make more personal connections within the book world. Antiquarian book dealers often lament the absence of young collectors, but how is a young collector to make his or her presence known to dealers? Even as an award-winning collector and now a curator, I would probably be known by name to just one dealer, and that's because I had previously worked at his store! With my current finances, I am able to purchase a dozen or so titles a year, three or four of which might make a dealer take notice. The remainder of my purchases are less expensive books most dealers would likely overlook. However, I am confident that there are many others like me, slowly and quietly building collections and making connections with other collectors, libraries, and dealers when we can. Indeed, young dealers and collectors are finding new communities in social media on sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. We are buying and selling books and ephemera in ways that would be incredible to A. Edward Newton, John Carter, or Belle da Costa Greene, but I suspect we would win them over with our enthusiasm and drive.

With the exhibition catalogue beside me at my desk, I type these closing remarks during the last two weeks of the exhibition, which proved popular and was extended by nearly two months. The catalogue, *A Contemplative Angler: Selections from the Bruce P. Dancik Collection of*



Left to right: *The Ristigouche and Its Salmon Fishing: With a Chapter on Angling Literature* (1888); *Fishing in Jasper* (1947); and *The Edmonton Trout Fishing Club Fishing Guide*. 2nd ed. (1974).



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The exhibition catalogue, A Contemplative Angler: Selections from the Bruce P. Dancik Collection of Angling Books.

Angling Books, has sold well, and Dancik, Bruce Peel Special Collections and I have carved our place in a venerable tradition of writing about books on angling. Nevertheless, by the time

this article goes to print, the exhibition will be closed, and the books will resume their slumber in the stacks. The acute excitement of their display will be replaced by the slow simmer of their future potential. The books will not be idle on their shelves, however. They will be waiting, calling out quietly for researchers to discover new significance in their pages, to reinterpret their content through lenses of changing times and paradigms not yet imagined.

1. *Amphora* editor Peter Mitham interviewed Justin Hanisch about his collecting experiences for the article “Schools of Thought,” *Amphora* 178 (July 2011), 3-6.
2. An edited version of Justin Hanisch’s prize-winning essay for the contest, “A History of Fish,” appeared in *Amphora* 178 (July 2011), 6-8. The full text is available at <http://bit.do/Hanisch-Fish-2011>.

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~ Justin Hanisch is a biologist with Alberta Environment and Parks based in Calgary. His essay placed first in the National Book Collecting Contest for Young Canadians Under 30 in 2011, a competition sponsored by the Alcuin Society, the Bibliographical Society of Canada, and the W.A. Deacon Literary Foundation.



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A view of the exhibition cases at Bruce Peel Special Collections.