

Schools of Thought

PETER MITHAM interviews Justin Hanisch and discovers a young collector who sees books as both artifacts of and witnesses to intellectual life.



Books about fish printed before 1901 form the core of Justin Hanisch's collection.

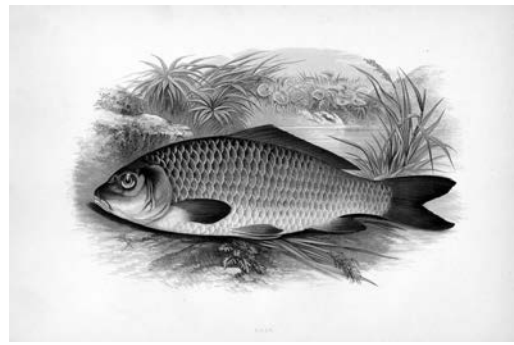
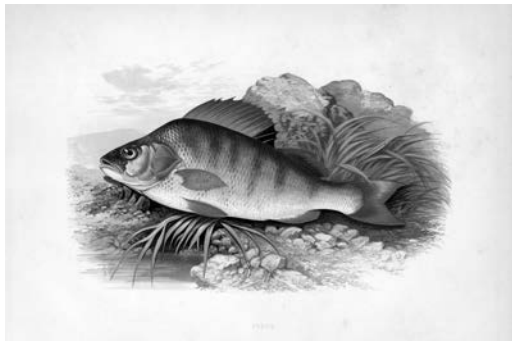
THOSE OF US who collect books, or are collectors of any sort, manage to acquire items that appeal to us on account of appearance. Andrew Steeves of Gaspereau Press attested to this phenomenon when he addressed Alcuin Society members in March 2005. He noted with pride how some Gaspereau books attracted buyers from across bookstores based on designs that stood out in the crowd of books vying for consumers' attention.

Similarly, when scouting older books or merely shopping the second-hand shops for a particularly hard-to-find book, we might be drawn (all things being equal) to the copy that has the more interesting appearance, provenance or marginalia.

And so it was for Justin Hanisch, a 27-year-old graduate student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and the first-place winner of this year's National Book Collecting Contest, sponsored by the Alcuin Society, the Bibliographical Society of Canada and the W.A. Deacon Literary Foundation. The well-worn 1985 copy

of *Spinner Fishing for Steelhead, Salmon, and Trout*, by Jed Davis, a veteran sportfisher and tackle manufacturer, caught his eye when he was about 12 years old and he snapped it up. Its venerable, worn appearance mirrored his passion for fishing, but also triggered an interest in books as objects. "It looked like it had led an interesting life," he says now.

Collecting books about fishing, not only those that wear their history on their jacket but also those that bear witness to the development of people's understanding of fish, has since become the focus of his book-buying habit. "I'm interested in books about fish, but I'm also interested in antiquarian books," he says. "My collection allows me to look at the history of fish, and how people's relationships to fish and their understanding of fish change through time, but . . . collecting antiquarian books allows me to explore the book as an object and see different binding styles, different type styles and that sort of thing."



Perch (left) and Carp (right), two plates from W. Houghton, British Fresh-Water Fishes (1879).

Hanisch has a core collection of 76 titles from the period before 1901. It's not a large collection, but it's representative of his interests as both an ecologist and a bibliophile. "I've chosen fish to collect because it's something that I know about. I recognize what would be influential publications, which makes it easier to build the collection because I'm interested in doing the research," he explains.

An interesting copy of a lesser-known book sometimes trumps an influential publication as he's built his collection, but one particular title illustrates how the two can often be the same: Jonathan Couch, *A History of the Fishes of the British Islands* (1862–65; 4 vols.). The work has a bookplate commemorating its being saved from a fire that ravaged the Norfolk & Norwich Lending Library in 1898.

"To me it's fascinating that over 100 years ago these books almost were destroyed," Hanisch said. "It's not an uncommon set but the fact this book had led an interesting life is, I think, pretty neat."

The attitude may well be the best encapsulation of Hanisch's own interest in collecting books. What interests him, unlike many other collectors, is not necessarily the authorship, publisher or design of a book, but rather its contents, the book as an enduring vessel for a particular kind of knowledge—in this case, knowledge of fish.

The books Hanisch is acquiring may deepen

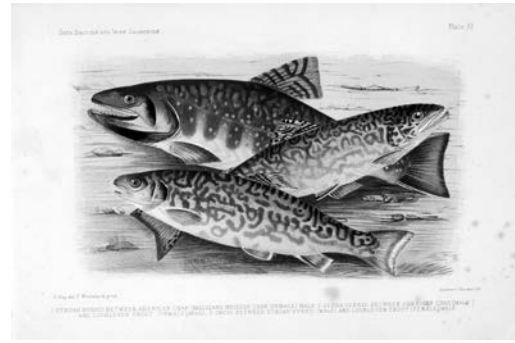
his appreciation of the book craft, but his primary interest is in the books as witnesses to a particular thread of intellectual development—one in which he participates as a doctoral candidate in the field of ecology, examining how non-native trout affect native bugs and fish in the lakes around Rocky Mountain House, Alberta.

"I think it provides really good context to what I'm doing," he says of his collection. "While it may not be relevant, up-to-date data, it's an important context that I do think deepens my appreciation for aquatic sciences."

While he isn't interested in the history of science or ideas per se, Hanisch appreciates the context provided for current thinking by books such as a work by the 18th-century Edinburgh medical professor Alexander Monro, *The Structure and Physiology of Fishes Explained, and Compared with Those of Man and Other Animals* (1785).

"It's interesting that they're comparing fish to man 'cause it sort of shows—even well before Darwin, when people started to think about common descent—people were noticing, clearly, that there were analogous parts of fish and people," he says. "It provides context, I think, to evolutionary thought that people were really noticing the fact that it's got to be more than coincidence that we look so much like other animals, including fish."

Monro's is a departure from an earlier work such as Conrad Gessner's *Fischnach*, originally



Plates from *W. Houghton (left), British Fresh-Water Fishes (1879),*
and *Francis Day (right), British and Irish Salmonidae (1887).*

published in the 1550s but which Hanisch has in a Swiss edition from 1575. The book features fish easily recognized today as well as more fanciful specimens, such as the merbishop and mermonk. Monro's work underscores how the Enlightenment, and advances in medical science spearheaded by doctors at the Edinburgh school as well as Scottish anatomist William Hunter (himself an avid book collector), were giving knowledge an empirical basis rooted in observation rather than conjecture. Gessner might have modelled the mermonk on the tonsured clerics among men, but Monro took fish as his starting point for observations on human physiology.

Hanisch finds the shift fascinating. “[It] highlights the overall friction in the scientific revolution between ancient myths and the burgeoning science of the discipline, the way we understand it,” he says. “It shows that conflict.”

Other books document fish at a particular point in time. William Harris's *Angler's Guide and Tourists' Gazetteer of the Fishing Waters of the United States and Canada* (1884) is a sport fishing guide for late-19th-century anglers. Today it attests to the disappearance of species such as the Michigan grayling.

“[It] lists around 15 places to fish for the Michigan grayling, which is a gorgeous fish,” Hanisch explains. “But by the 1930s Michigan grayling were totally extinct from

Michigan—completely gone. So that book highlights what can happen, what people can do when we're not careful with natural resources or preserving endangered species.”

But *The Angler's Guide* doesn't just remind contemporary readers of what has been lost; Hanisch says the book may also help point out where the grayling could thrive as plans for its reintroduction to Michigan take shape.

“It could be a valuable source for simply learning where grayling were and what streams they had flourished in before we had kicked them out,” he says.

With a nod to contemporary fish populations, Hanisch also has a signed copy of the landmark work by Joseph Nelson and Martin Paetz, *The Fishes of Alberta* (1970). The book is an appropriate title for Hanisch both because of the stature of the author and because Hanisch is studying in Alberta. It's a direct nod to his own academic progress and feeds his ongoing collecting efforts. The root of his collection remains in the period prior to 1901, however.

Hanisch's development as a collector is instructive to those who would also like to collect books. Growing up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he enjoyed freshwater fishing, but he also lived in a house full of books. “I have readers in my family and I read quite a bit growing up, and still do,” he says. “I'd always

been around books and been interested in keeping them after I read them. But I'd say in the last 10 years I really started to become more cognizant of collecting as a discipline."

He educated himself by reading the memoirs of booksellers and book collectors, and questions of how to channel his own passion for collecting constantly presented themselves. Books on fishing gave way to early books about fish in North America and books highlighting the development of scientific thought regarding fish.

"As I learned more about books themselves through reading a lot of stuff on the Internet—a lot of blogs and that sort of thing, but also books on the history of printing—I became more interested in antiquarian books, but also in having a well-defined collection," he says.

While many collections have, in the past, depended on the collector's relationship with a dealer, younger collectors have to watch out for themselves because they don't have the cash that's essential to maintaining the commercial side of the relationship. Hanisch is grateful that the cash

he earns in Canada goes farther in the U.S. book market thanks to the exchange rate, but he still keeps an eye out for interesting titles on sites such as AbeBooks and titles that come up at auction.

Right now, the book he has his eye on is Peter Artedi's *Ichthyologia* (1738), which was edited by Carolus Linnaeus and is an important work on account of this connection. A copy sold at auction this summer for €850 (well above expectations). While financial limitations put it beyond reach, Hanisch one day hopes to acquire a copy.

The dream shows that while there may be plenty of fish in the sea, it's the ones that get away that keep the diehards trolling for the next big catch.

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~ An online exhibition of images of books in Justin Hanisch's collection will go live this summer at http://exhibits.library.ualberta.ca/streetprint_fish/.

~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.

A History of Fish

by JUSTIN HANISCH

MY FINGERS TRAVEL DOWN the book's spine and the smooth leather gives way to a slight indentation where the binder's stamp applied gold. I briefly trace the gilt ornamentation in the first spine compartment, following an elaborate maze of flourish. My fingers continue to a raised band, which adds not only beauty to the spine but also conceals the binder's cords that have helped hold the book together for 200 years. I think of the bookbinder, the man who bound *this* book that I hold in my hands. He is long dead, likely forgotten, but I hold *his* work in *my* hands. My thoughts linger but my fingers move on to the next compartment, containing the book's title, *Histoire des Poissons*.

Again, I imagine the bookbinder and this book, new and smelling of fresh leather, text block and binding united for the first time. The binder lays his tools on the spine. "Histoire des Poissons"

appears new and sparkling in gilt. Imagination yields to the present, and I see *Histoire des Poissons* as it is today, slightly chipped and dulled but still proud. I remove the book from between its shelf mates—two other books with their own histories—created decades and continents apart but now united, however briefly, in a collection. I place the book in my lap and smile. Its weight feels familiar. I open the book and the front hinge creaks. I read the title page and feel the bite of the type—*Histoire des Poissons*. A History of Fish.

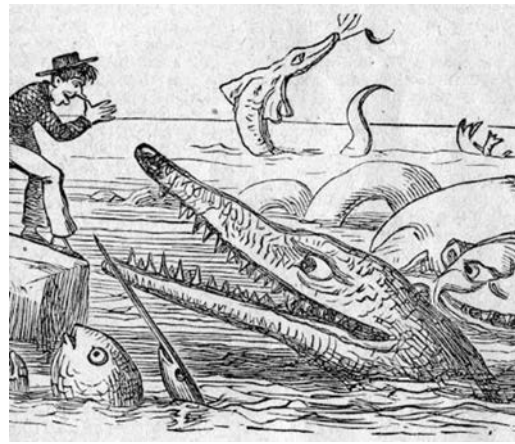
I collect books on fish and have for nearly as long as I can remember. Specifically, I collect books on fish published before 1901. As a PhD candidate in ecology who studies fish, I know much of the information contained in my books is, well, antiquated, but that is precisely part of their appeal. My collection satisfies for me three unifying purposes. First, and most generally,

collecting satiates the impulse to acquire. For what collector does not enjoy the thrill of the hunt—discovering, obtaining, and integrating a “new” book into a collection? Second, and more specifically, my collection affords the opportunity to immerse myself into the history of my chosen field, to understand better the research and researchers who came before me. Third, and most personally, collecting pre-20th-century books allows me to appreciate intimately the book as an object. I love everything about a book—binding, paper, type, illustration, provenance—everything. These three unifying principles motivate and focus my collecting. I will explain, with a series of examples, how these principles manifest in specific books from my collection.

I will start with my oldest book, Conrad Gessner’s *Fischbuch*, the second German edition printed by Christoffel Froschover in Zürich (1575). *Fischbuch* is bound in recent full vellum. Through the centuries it has lost its original binding, likely oak boards covered in blind-stamped pigskin and held shut with metal clasps. The book also has other evidence of brushes with destruction. The margins of several folios contain old repairs to cuts and tears, damage that presumably accumulated as the original binding perished. But, even with repairs and a new binding, oh, what a book it is!

Gessner’s effort on fish, part of a larger *Historiae Animalium*, is a compilation of all extant Western knowledge on “fish” at the date of publication. It remains the oldest (and most significant) book I’ve purchased, and researching editions, auction records, and collations of other copies to assure completeness was just plain fun. Additionally the book provides fascinating insight into the context of 16th-century natural history, and without doubt, this book, as an object, is beautiful.

While I enjoy purchasing and preserving “character copies” of fish books, not all my books fall into this category. As mentioned, understanding the history of ichthyology is one of my core collecting principles, and several of my books reveal significant historical aspects of fisheries. For example, I include in my collection a copy of William Harris’s *Angler’s Guide and Tourists’ Gazetteer of the Fishing Waters of the United States and Canada*, published in



From Thomas Alexander,
Fish and Fishing (1877).

New York in 1884 by the press of the Armchair Angler. While I do not typically include books strictly on fishing in my collection, this book is valuable for its thousands of entries detailing fishing waters and their resident fishes in the latter portion of the 19th century.

Many other “fishing books” contain interesting natural history observations of fish, and I include some carefully chosen fishing books in my fish book collection. I include, for example, the first edition (1845) of John J. Brown’s *American Angler’s Guide* in original gilt-stamped publisher’s cloth. This book is significant, as it is the first book composed and published in North America devoted solely to fishing. In addition to tips on fishing, however, the book contains over 150 pages of natural history observations of numerous fish species. Rigorous description of American fishes was in its infancy in this time period, so the observations contained in *The American Angler’s Guide* were important additions to the burgeoning knowledge of American fishes.

I also include books in my collection whose historical interest is derived from their provenance. Many scholarly books were inscribed by their authors to other academics, and I include such association copies in my collection. My copy of George Brown Goode’s *American Fishes*, published by the Standard Book Company in 1888, is inscribed to another famous author of fish books, Frederick Mather. As well, my copy of Edward Cope’s *Synopsis of the Cyprinidae of*

Pennsylvania, published by the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society in 1869, is inscribed to an influential scientist, Frederic Ward Putnam. These inscribed copies provide insight into the personal relationships that existed among scientists of the 19th century.

All my books have been individually chosen for my collection. Collectively, I feel my books provide historical context to man's relationship to fish. Moreover, each book also has an intangible, almost primal appeal. The tactile experience of books is real, important, and moving. The great book collector Robert Curzon, writing to Sir Thomas Phillipps in 1861, provides an apt summary of my feelings when I add a book to my collection:

Why when I get a new book, (or rather an old one,) I never stop looking at it, inside & out, right side uppermost, & upside down and I torment all the other old volumes, by shoving the new one between them, on the shelf. Heavy broad-backed old MSS. are disturbed, routed out and pushed about, woke up from their slumbers, & poked in the ribs, by the new arrival, till I have found a snug place for him, between 2 other old fellows about his size more or less, & then I pat him on the back & let him alone for a while, but I could never let him remain in the box for ½ an hour after I get him, even under the most desperate circumstance.

These sentiments, or something very close, have been felt by bibliophiles through the ages, and I look forward to experiencing that moment of bliss for many more years, and many more books, yet to come.

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~ This is an edited version of book collector Justin Hanisch's prize-winning essay for the 2010–2011 National Book Collecting Contest, sponsored by the Alcuin Society, the Bibliographical Society of Canada and the W.A. Deacon Literary Foundation. All three prize-winning essays will be available on the website of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, www.bsc-sbc.ca/en/news.html.

THE RUNNERS-UP

This year's National Book Collecting Contest attracted submissions on a variety of topics.

Edmonton's Justin Hanisch received a \$1,000 award for his first-place collection regarding the history of fish. Runners-up this year also hailed from Western Canada.

Gregory Robert Freeman, 26, of Surrey, B.C., ranked second with his extensive collection of Tudors and Stuart imprints, and received an award of \$500. Kieran Fox, 27, of Vancouver, ranked third with a collection of works examining Tibetan works in translation. He opted to donate his prize of \$250 to supporting the libraries of the Buddhist monks whose help was invaluable in assisting him build his collection.

The third National Book Collecting Contest is now accepting entries from collectors under the age of 30. The deadline for submissions is March 5, 2012. AbeBooks has committed to providing the cash prizes, while the National Post and CBC Books will serve as media sponsors of the contest. The contest will continue to be organized by the Alcuin Society, the Bibliographical Society of Canada and the W.A. Deacon Literary Foundation. Complete contest details are available at www.alcuinsociety.com.



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John Meier of the W.A. Deacon Literary Foundation congratulates Justin Hanisch.