

# Angling Sketches

Angling Sketches by Thomas Tod Stoddart is a collection of reflective and descriptive essays that capture the pleasures of fishing, blending nature observation with the philosophy and art of angling.

## THE CONFESSIONS OF A DUFFER

In "The Confessions of a Duffer," the narrator humorously chronicles his experiences and misadventures in fishing, providing a candid insight into his self-acknowledged lack of skill and technique in the sport. Despite his enthusiastic love for fishing, he humorously describes himself as a natural-born "duffer," a term he uses to denote his incompetence and clumsiness, which manifests through a series of comical failures and mishaps.

The "duffer" attributes his failure in fishing to a combination of inherent clumsiness, poor eyesight, indolence, and a temper easily frustrated by the challenges of fishing. He recounts various amusing incidents that highlight his inadequacy: from the inept handling of his fishing gear, losing flies in clumsy attempts to catch fish, to breaking parts of his rod and failing to utilize a landing net effectively. His unconventional and careless approach to fishing—stuffing flies in pockets or books, never carrying essential tools, and losing caught fish—is portrayed with a light-hearted tone that underscores his acceptance of his fate as a duffer.

Despite these setbacks, the narrator's love for fishing remains undiminished. He speculates that this passion might be a hereditary trait passed down without the accompanying skill. His encounters with fishing, from the struggles to keep equipment intact to the ambitious yet often futile attempts to catch trout in challenging conditions, illustrate a persistence and joy in the face of repeated failure.

His narrative is tinged with self-deprecation and a wry acknowledgment of his limitations. He contrasts his ineptitude with the possibility of inheriting a mere passion for fishing from an ancestor, without the skill that should accompany it. The duffer's ambition—to catch big trout using the dry fly in the Test, a task that eludes him due to his inability to see the fly or react in time—highlights his eternal optimism and unyielding dedication to the sport, despite his acknowledged shortcomings.

The chapter concludes with a reflective acknowledgment of the duffer's unquenchable ambition and the humor in his continuous yet often unsuccessful endeavors. Through this tale of personal foibles and fishing escapades, the duffer casts a light on the essence of fishing as an enduring pursuit, one that captivates even those seemingly ill-suited to its demands, illustrating the broader human condition of persisting in the face of certain adversity.

## A BORDER BOYHOOD

other skies, in new countries, or under the green grass. But the remembrance of them, and of the days by Yarrow and Ettrick and Tweed, is a possession forever, tender and not altogether sad. The old waters still murmur, the old songs are still sung, the old names echo in memory. In the solitudes of the streams, under the shadows of the towers and woods, perhaps, even now, the fairy deer may be seen by children's eyes, and the Silver Lady of the Scotts may glide through the copse or stand with her foot in the pool, as in the tale of Thomas the Rhymer.

## LOCH AWE--THE BOATMAN'S YARNS

Loch Awe, Scotland, offers a unique angling experience distinct from the easily accessible and overfished waters of the region. Despite the challenges of finding good trout fishing in Scotland south of the Pentland Firth, Loch Awe remains a gem for those seeking the blend of solitude, natural beauty, and angling. Unlike the polluted or overfished rivers closer to urban centers, Loch Awe and other remote lochs offer better prospects for anglers, with Sutherland's lochs standing out for their accessibility and abundance of fish, though the journey there discourages brief holiday trips.

Loch Awe, while not as untouched as it once was due to the railway bringing it closer to urban populations, still holds allure. The Victorian-era charm described by Mr. Colquhoun in "The Moor and the Loch" has undoubtedly changed, making way for more anglers, steam launches, and even villas, yet it retains much of its natural beauty and angling potential. The loch is populated with trout, including the famed *salmo ferrox*, though these creatures have become warier of the angler's bait over time. Angling in Loch Awe is seasonally dependent, with the best trout fishing occurring from mid-April to mid-June. The experience is enhanced by the magnificent scenery, particularly around the islands and near historical sites like the Green Island with its Celtic burial ground.

On Loch Awe, anglers find themselves in competition not only with the elements but with the increased pressure from fellow fishermen. Despite this, the loch offers rewarding experiences for those who find joy in the act of fishing itself, beyond the mere tally of the catch. The variety of trout, from the golden, thick type to the more common, lean dark green variety, offers both challenge and reward, necessitating diverse tactics and flies.

Andrew Lang, in his account, emphasizes not just the technical aspects of angling but the immersive experience of being in nature, fishing amidst stunning landscapes, and connecting with the local culture and history. This narrative weaves together practical angling advice with reflections on the evolving nature of fishing in Loch Awe, juxtaposing the sport's traditional solitude with the modern realities of increased accessibility and popularity. Through Lang's eyes, Loch Awe represents a nuanced fishing destination—where the joy of angling intertwines with the appreciation of Scotland's rugged beauty and rich traditions, hinting at the layered experiences awaiting those who visit its waters.

## **THE YARN OF THE BLACK OFFICER**

In "The Yarn of the Black Officer," part of the "Angling Sketches" collection, the tale unfolds around a dark character known as the Black Officer and his extraordinary life, as told by a boatman. Originating from the 18th century, during a time when the Black Watch (42nd Highlanders) was recruiting, the Black Officer is dispatched to enlist men, by persuasion or force, with a promise of merely parading before the King in London—a promise unfulfilled. Instead, they are sent to India, highlighting the officer's deceit.

One night, while the soldiers camp near a haunted locale, a mysterious red man visits, revealing supernatural elements. This man's encounter with the Black Officer, observed by a soldier named Shamus Mackenzie, hints at the officer's dealings beyond the mortal plane. Despite confronting the French in India and being the sole survivor of a tunnel explosion, the Black Officer's myth grows when he miraculously survives apparent death, with rumors suggesting his resurrection was aided by the supernatural.

The story evolves from military exploits to folklore, as the officer, upon returning to Scotland, is regularly visited by a talking red deer, suggesting a deep connection with the uncanny. The narrative climaxes with the Black Officer and thirteen companions disappearing without a trace after venturing out on a supposed deer hunt, fueling speculation of a pact with the devil.

This tale, rich in Highland folklore and supernatural themes, is echoed in historical legends and literary works, suggesting a blend of fact and fiction that has captivated local and literary imaginations alike. Unlike

the clear-cut military narratives, this story weaves the ethereal with the mortal, leaving an enduring mystery of the Black Officer's fate and the true nature of his dealings, both in the highlands of Scotland and the battlefields of India. Through conversations with the boatman, the author draws parallels to other myths and legends, underscoring the persistent allure of the supernatural in the cultural tapestry of the Scottish Highlands.

## **LOCH-FISHING**

Loch-fishing in Scotland presents a tapestry of mystery and intrigue, illustrated through the varying character and behavior of trout across different lochs. In Loch Borlan, for example, small trout are abundant and eager, contrasting sharply with the rare, larger specimens found in lakes like Loch Awe and Loch Tummell. This variance raises questions about the ecological dynamics within these waters.

The narrative then shifts to a quaint tarn near a village, revealing how trout can suddenly become the center of attention, demonstrating unpredictable and selective feeding patterns that challenge even the most seasoned anglers. A testament to the unpredictability of loch fishermen's experiences, a small, overlooked tarn near the village hosts unexpectedly large and finicky trout, elusive to both traditional and inventive fishing methods.

Another loch, situated on a remote hillside, embodies the frustration of "rising short," a phenomenon exacerbated by the illegal practice of ottering, which sharpens trout's instincts for evasion. The story culminates at Little Loch Beg, a hidden gem plagued by the same angling challenges found in its larger counterparts. Despite its inconspicuous size and the difficulties imposed by its geography—thick water-lilies and treacherous mud—it harbors trout of impressive size and voracity.

The variance in trout size and behavior across the lochs and tarns depicted raises questions about their breeding, feeding habits, and the impact of human activity on their populations. Anglers adapt their strategies—moving from finesse with small flies to sheer force using larger lures and unconventional tactics. Yet, the larger, more desirable catches often remain just out of reach, a common theme that connects these angling narratives.

These stories underscore the enchanting allure of loch-fishing in Scotland, where every water body, from the well-trodden to the obscure, presents its own unique set of mysteries and challenges. It's a reminder of the delicate balance within these aquatic ecosystems and the unpredictable adventure that awaits with each cast.

## **LOCH LEVEN**

In "Loch Leven," the chapter from "Angling Sketches," the author weaves a tapestry balancing the serene art of angling with the allure and disappointment of chance, as exemplified by his friend's contrasting hobbies of fishing and gambling at Monte Carlo. This narrative delves into the angling experience at Loch Leven, juxtaposing the contemplative solitude of fishing with the communal and competitive nature brought about by angling clubs and competitions. Through a mix of personal anecdote and descriptive exposition, the chapter explores Loch Leven's reputation—both criticized and appreciated—amidst the changing landscape of angling culture.

Loch Leven, despite its reputation for being over-familiar and somewhat diminished by competitive angling practices, retains an undeniable charm. The author contrasts the crowded, competitively-fished waters with the nuanced beauty of the landscape and the quality of the trout, which are reputed for their silver brightness and fight. However, the experience at Loch Leven goes beyond mere angling; it is about engaging with the history of the place, notably the prison of Queen Mary, and appreciating the loch's natural and historical

tapestry.

The author critiques certain modern practices at Loch Leven, such as the allowance of trolling—a less skill-based method of fishing—arguing that it detracts from the purity of fly fishing. Yet, amid these changes, the essence of Loch Leven as an angling destination remains. It's depicted as a place where one can still find beauty and challenge, underscored by interactions with knowledgeable boatmen, the camaraderie among anglers, and the contemplation of the surrounding nature and history.

Angling in Loch Leven emerges as an activity that is as much about connecting with the Scottish landscape and its stories as it is about the technical pursuit of trout. The loch's ever-changing conditions, requiring adaptation and patience from the angler, reflect broader themes of change, tradition, and personal fulfillment. Through detailed observations, reflections on the angling community, and the poignancy of the loch's historical connections, the chapter presents Loch Leven as a complex, multifaceted destination that remains deeply rooted in Scotland's angling and cultural heritage.

## **THE BLOODY DOCTOR**

In the chapter titled "The Bloody Doctor (A Bad Day on Clearburn)" from "Angling Sketches," the narrator reminisces about their unforgettable experiences fishing at Clearburn Loch, a place notorious for its challenging fishing conditions yet irresistible due to its abundance of trout, a rarity in other local waters devastated by pollution and overfishing. The loch's untouched population of trout draws the narrator back, despite the many difficult days spent attempting to catch them. The chapter paints a vibrant picture of the Scottish landscape, rich in history and natural beauty, setting the stage for a day of fishing filled with anticipation.

The journey to Clearburn Loch takes the reader through iconic Scottish countryside, invoking the memory of poets like John Leyden and the legendary Walter Scott, enriching the narrative with cultural and historical references. Once at the loch, the narrator faces the challenges of fishing in this unique environment. The loch is surrounded by reeds and has a bottom fraught with treacherous springs, making it nearly impossible to fish effectively except from a small gravelly shore.

The day's fishing is initially slow until a sudden rise of trout creates an exciting spectacle, with trout voraciously feeding on an unusual insect the narrator cannot match with any artificial fly in their collection. Despite the frustration and the eventual cessation of the rise, the beauty of the landscape and the occasional interactions with local wildlife provide a serene backdrop to the narrator's efforts.

The climax of the fishing adventure involves a series of dramatic attempts to catch a particularly large trout, which the narrator humorously suggests might be the Devil, given its knack for staying just out of reach. The battle with the trout through the reeds is tense and ultimately unsuccessful, leading to a contemplative retreat tinged with the disappointment familiar to anglers—a mix of solace in nature's beauty and the elusiveness of the perfect catch.

Through vivid descriptions and a deep appreciation for the lore of the Scottish borders, the chapter encapsulates the essence of angling as not just a sport but a spiritual journey, offering insights into the allure of fishing in such a storied landscape. The narrative weaves together the frustrations and joys of angling, the connection to the land and its history, and the eternal hope for that elusive, perfect catch, offering a reflective and immersive read.

## **THE LADY OR THE SALMON?**

The tragic and poignant tale of the Hon. Houghton Grannom unfolds within the somber context of his untimely demise while angling on the Tweed River. This narrative, rooted in the vestiges of honor, love, and despair, chronicles Grannom's fatal entanglement with a salmon, resulting in his death in the dangerous waters known as "The Trows." Grannom, embroiled in personal turmoil following the abrupt cancellation of his wedding to Olive Dunne due to a regrettable incident that marred their nuptials, decides on a solitary fishing expedition as his chosen method of escape from the pain of his broken engagement and the ensuing shame.

Grannom's premeditated encounter with the salmon, depicted as both a lover of angling and a man grappling with profound emotional distress, intricately weaves his passion with his downfall. His intricate plan unfolds on the eve of what was to be his wedding day, driven by a complex interplay of emotions including guilt, love, and a desire for redemption. His reflections on fate, free will, and personal agency highlight the internal conflict that ultimately guides his actions towards a fatalistic conclusion.

Olive Dunne, described as a woman of pride and dignity, becomes the unintended catalyst for Grannom's despair. Her inability to forgive the indiscretion that led to their wedding's cancellation solidifies Grannom's decision. The account of Grannom's fishing endeavour, marked by his battle with an extraordinary salmon, mirrors his inner turmoil and struggle against his circumstances. This contest with the fish is not only a physical battle but also a metaphorical representation of his fight against the currents of his life's tribulations.

As Grannom becomes ensnared by both the literal and figurative hooks of his fate, his story culminates in a tragic confluence of his passion for angling and his desire to escape the indignities that have befallen him. Through the detailed recollection of his final angling experience, Grannom's narrative functions as an apology for his life and choices, ending with the solemn discovery of his body, a testament to the depths of his despair and the irreversible consequences of his actions. This chapter ultimately serves as a reflection on the fragility of honor, the complexity of human emotions, and the indelible impact of personal decisions.

## **A TWEEDSIDE SKETCH**

The tale unravels as a cautionary adventure, serving to remind the heedless of the vital importance of meticulousness, even in pursuits as leisurely as fishing or golf. It opens with the narrator lamenting his past disregard for detail—a trait that has consistently led to avoidable mishaps, not just in fishing, but across life's many arenas. Through his story, a plea is made to embrace thoroughness in every endeavor, driven by the narrator's own regret over a lifetime's worth of carelessness.

The essence of the story lies in an ill-fated salmon fishing expedition on the banks of the Tweed, contrasted against the idyllic, though less thrilling, trout fishing. The narrative weaves through the serene beauty and the art of trout fishing in waters abundant with grace, leading to the more demanding, albeit less refined, salmon fishing. Despite not being an adept salmon fisher himself, the narrator embarks on this venture, driven by the challenge it presents, and perhaps, the allure of the Tweed's enchanting landscape that teems with history and natural splendor.

Dressed in the bulky attire of a salmon fisher and equipped with a burdensome rod, the narrator sets his sights on the salmon-rich Tweed. However, a series of forgetful acts—leaving behind essential gear like the landing net, salmon flies, and even the whisky flask—seeds the expedition with hurdles. Yet, the discovery of a single salmon fly in his possession spurs a series of attempts to capture the elusive fish. These attempts are met with heartbreak as poor preparation and compromised equipment result in losing not one, but two promising catches.

The story crescendos with the narrator's reflections on the fleeting joys of fishing against the immutable beauty of the Tweedside, tinged with a deeper sense of regret over the day's failures. Through this angling

misadventure, correlations are drawn between the diligence required in fishing and the broader strokes of living life itself. Every oversight, every careless act in preparation, is paralleled with lost opportunities and what-ifs that linger long after the moment has passed.

In the denouement, caught amidst the picturesque setting of the Tweed, the narrator is left ruminating over the whims of fate and fish alike—highlighting that neither patience nor luck can substitute for the careful attention to detail that was so sorely lacking from the outset. The adventure concludes not with the joy of a triumphant catch, but with a somber introspection on the consequences of neglect and the bitter lessons taught by the river and its elusive salmon. Through this Tweedside sketch, the narrative imparts a timeless lesson: in fishing, as in life, thoroughness and attentiveness to the minutiae can make all the difference between success and regretful reflection.

## **THE DOUBLE ALIBI**

In the remote, pastoral loneliness of Glen Aline, nestled within Western Galloway's stark moorlands, stretches a landscape mostly untouched by tourists or anglers, due to its lack of accommodation and uninspiring fishing prospects. This desolate yet subtly captivating scenery drew the narrator, seeking solitude from society and work on a peculiar writing project titled "A History of the Unexplained." Lodged at a shepherd's house, the narrator revels in the simplicity and solitude, punctuated occasionally by solitary angling expeditions to nearby water bodies like Loch Nan, despite the mediocre promise of capturing any large trout.

One misty morning, an unexpected figure is spotted angling on Loch Nan, an occurrence as rare as it is intriguing due to the loch's usual desolation. After a mysterious disappearance of this lone angler amidst a sudden mist, and subsequent odd encounters where the figure seemed to vaporize into thin air, the narrator's curiosity escalates into an obsession, driven in part by a vague sense of recognition. The lone angler, a figure that moved with a familiar stoop and donned a clerical hat, evokes a haunting familiarity yet eludes direct contact, always vanishing when approached.

On a final angling trip after a period of feverish weather dampened by work, the narrator's paths cross with the angler's in a dire circumstance, leading to a life-saving extraction from the treacherous peat bogs of Loch Nan. The mysterious angler, revealed as Percy Allen, a former acquaintance from college days entangled in a regrettable scandal, offers a poignant twist to the narrative. Allen's subsequent unjust fall from grace, based on a bewildering appearance at an auction room which he did not physically attend, unfolds as a tragic tale of slander, innocence, and the often inexplicable nature of human experience.

Hidden within an old secret whiskey still, Allen's makeshift home unveils a man who, despite his erudition and past enthusiasm for rare books, sought refuge in isolation, a fugitive not from justice but from the misjudgments of society. As the story unfolds, the layers of Allen's misadventure in the realm of the unexplained become evident, revealing a man caught in a web of coincidental alibis and psychic phenomena unbeknownst to the logical world.

The convalescence and meager recovery of Allen in the shepherd's care, juxtaposed with reflections on the fickleness of human perception and testimony, culminates in a narrative that not only explores the mysteries of the Scottish moors but delves into the deeper uncharted territories of human conscience and consciousness. "The Double Alibi" stands as a testament to the enigmatic interplay between the physical realm and the landscapes of the mind, where truths are sometimes stranger than fiction, and the line between the explained and unexplained blurs into oblivion.

## **SCENE II. A BRIDGE**

In the chapter, Anglus, a devout angler, and his companion Scotus are interrupted in their fishing by the presence of laborers nearby and the frustrations of angling in the English countryside. Anglus attempts to pacify Scotus's objections to the cost and challenges of angling with a song that romanticizes the angler's life, highlighting its joys and trials with a light-hearted tone. Despite Scotus's departure out of disdain, Anglus persists, setting his sights on catching a notorious trout named George. His venture is fraught with mishaps, including a disruptive boy and struggles with both flora and fauna that hinder his angling efforts.

Anglus faces the irony of the angler's patience being tested not just by the unpredictable nature of fish but by the intrusions of people and ducks alike. The arrival of twenty-four ducks, which disrupt the feeding trout, culminates in Anglus accidentally hooking a duck instead of his intended quarry. Although he fails to catch any trout due to these interruptions, his spirits remain undampened, encapsulating the angler's eternal optimism.

The chapter concludes with Scotus's return, boasting of his own catch achieved through the use of an artificial lure called a Phantom, suggesting a contrast in angling philosophies. The ensuing disagreement over the ethics of angling methods escalates into a physical altercation, which is quickly resolved with sportsmanship and an exchange of food and drink. Anglus explains to Scotus that the essence of their excursion was not to catch fish per se, but to engage in the sport of dry fly fishing, underscoring a fundamental distinction between mere catching and the art of angling as they understand it.

Through these events, the chapter eloquently captures the essence of angling as an endeavor of patience, skill, and appreciation for the subtleties of nature, as well as the camaraderie and personal philosophies that enrich the experience, despite—or perhaps because of—the myriad challenges it presents.