

Introduction

At high noon on a snowy, frigid Saturday in January 1922, fifty-four men gathered for lunch in the Venetian Gothic splendor of the Chicago Athletic Club. Professionally disparate (their ranks included salesmen, journalists, lawyers, a jeweler, a commercial artist, and a clergyman), in private life all members of the group “were first and foremost fly fishermen.”¹ As they feasted on broiled Lake Superior whitefish in an oak-paneled dining room, the men swapped angling tips and fish stories. But then the tone of the meeting turned somber. One of the conveners of the lunch, publicist and advertising executive Will H. Dilg, began to address the group. Dilg “demanded of us an accounting,” a participant later recalled. “He showed us denuded hills, once rich in forests; polluted cesspools that once were glorious rivers alive with fish; a mere trace of wildfowl that once had darkened the sky; and asked us pointedly if this were the sort of heritage we were proud to hand down to coming generations.” Dilg refused to allow his dining companions to retreat into the comfort of their postprandial coffee and cigars. “WHAT SHALL WE DO TO SAVE OUR FISHING?” Dilg challenged his audience.² In response to Dilg’s impassioned call to action, the group decided they must preserve the natural environment of the United

States by creating a national alliance of conservationist-sportsmen—and they proudly named their new fraternity of environmentalists after “the patron saint of anglers everywhere,” Izaak Walton.³ The founders of the Izaak Walton League of America identified with their patronym, one chronicler explained, “not only because of [Walton’s] love of angling, but also because of his deep appreciation of the outdoors, his true sportsmanship and advanced ideas on conservation.”⁴

The Izaak Walton League immediately adopted a broad and aggressive purview, its leadership styling the fledgling organization as the “Defender of Woods, Waters and Wild Life.”⁵ Its holistic perspective on conservation distinguished the League from other environmental groups active in the 1920s, which focused instead on isolated features of the American outdoors.⁶ And the League’s structure—in which each member of the national organization also belonged to and socialized within a local chapter—further set the new group apart from its competitors. Like other fraternal service organizations that boomed during the 1920s, the Izaak Walton League deliberately constituted its membership as a band of brothers: historian Stephen Fox observes that “a typical chapter of the [L]eague resembled not one of the older conservation groups but rather a Rotary Club that liked to go fishing.”⁷ The League’s combination of conviviality and breadth of vision struck a chord, and within three years of its founding the organization had recruited upward of one hundred thousand members based in chapters across the United States at a time when the Sierra Club (founded in 1892) and the Audubon Association (founded in 1905) each had fewer than seven thousand members.⁸ The Izaak Walton League of America “was a phenomenon—the first conservation group with a mass membership,” and the group quickly began to flex its political muscle.⁹ In 1923, the League thwarted attempts by business interests to build roads in the Superior National Forest in Minnesota.¹⁰ Simultaneously, upon learning that developers planned to drain the watershed of a three-hundred-mile-long stretch of the upper Mississippi the organization sprang into action, and by 1924 the Izaak Walton League had pressured the federal government to transform the endangered watershed into a wildlife preserve financed by a congressional appropriation. The largest previous sum earmarked for such a purpose had been \$40,000; by contrast, the Izaak Walton League landed a whopping \$1.5 million for its cause. The success of the “Ikes,” as League members proudly dubbed themselves, was unprecedented, and at the League’s third annual convention in 1925 Will Dilg (now

the group's president) boasted that "in the world of conservation, our League stands forth like a towering mountain set in the center of a vast prairie."¹¹

In 1926, an issue of the League's magazine featured a cartoon portraying the organization's militant members as chips off the formidable old block of their seventeenth-century namesake (see fig. 1). The image is dominated by a gigantic Izaak Walton who stands, bare-headed and barrel-chested, at the edge of a coniferous forest.¹² Walton carries in his left hand a huge war flag emblazoned with "Izaak Walton League," while his enormous right hand rests on the shoulder of Teddy Roosevelt, "the first conservationist in the White House," who's risen from the dead to help the Ikes defend a battlement with their clenched fists.¹³ League policy objectives—"Unremitting Opposition to Illegal, Destructive, and Unfair Methods in Hunting and Fishing," "Outdoor Recreation for Youth," "Game Farms and Fish Hatcheries for Increased Propagation and Distribution of Fish and Game," "Opposition to Injurious Drainage," "Federal Control to Protect and Conserve Our Forests"—are inscribed on the rectangular stones that form the crenellated wall guarded by the pugilistic Ikes. In the foreground of the cartoon, a gang of environmental villains retreats after unsuccessfully trying to breach the conservationists' defenses, and we can read the damning ID labels ("Game Hog," "Water Polluter," "Forest Exploiter," "Poacher," "Bad Sportsmanship") on the hats of the vanquished miscreants. This cartoon, its caption proudly proclaims, documents "A Battle the Izaak Walton League Is Winning."

The League's depiction of its eponym as the John Brown of conservationists was rooted in a long tradition of popular enthusiasm for Walton's narrativized fishing manual *The Compleat Angler*. First published in 1653 as a cheap little octavo that a fisherman could carry in his pocket, Walton's *Angler* appeared in five editions during the author's lifetime.¹⁴ Thanks to its sustained grassroots appeal, the book has been almost constantly in print since the first posthumous edition appeared in 1750 and remains "one of the most enduring literary classics in the English language."¹⁵ The bare-bones plot of the treatise is simple: a small group of men goes on a springtime fishing trip in rural Hertfordshire. Led by Walton's alter ego, the experienced angler Piscator, the vacationing anglers talk about fish, land fish, and eat fish—taking care each evening to wash down their catch of the day with plenty of alcohol. As a convivial fraternity of recreational sportsmen motivated by their shared passion for the outdoors, the intertwined structure and ethos of the Izaak Walton League of America thus mirrored dynamics

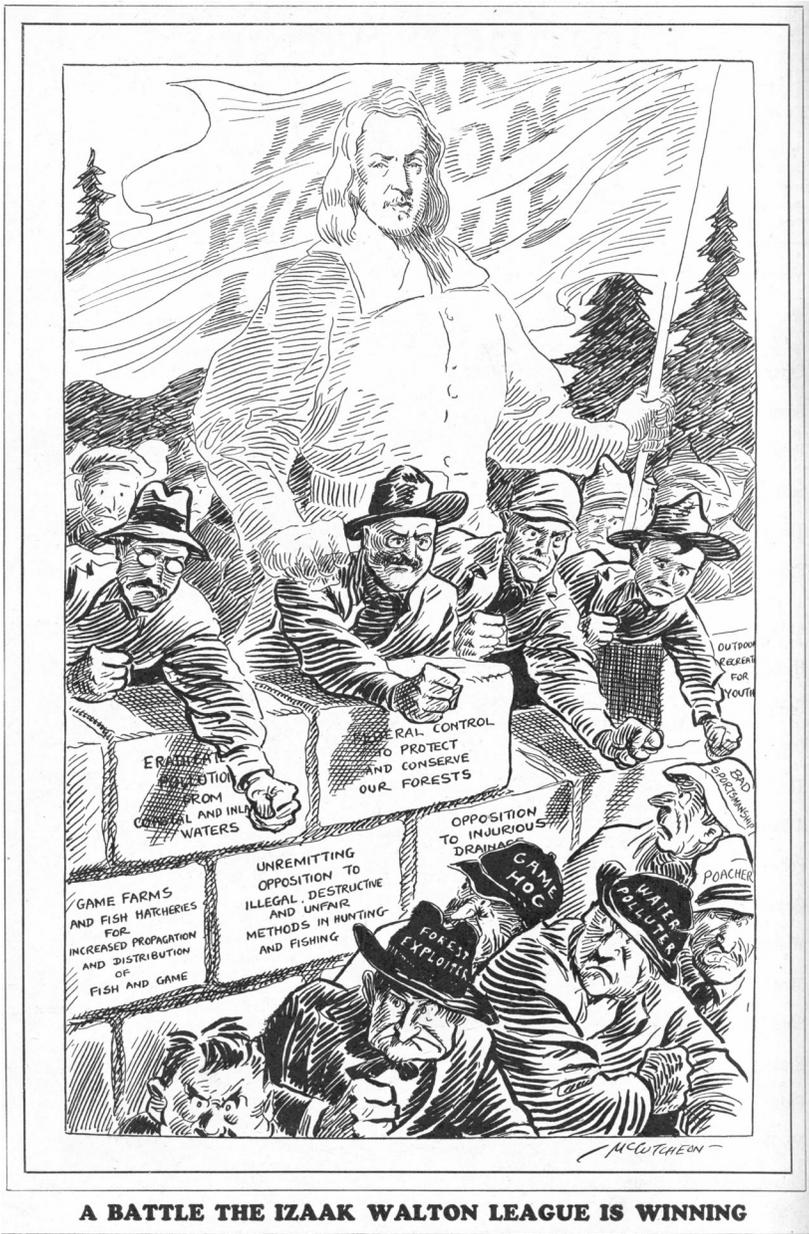


FIGURE 1 | Cartoon by John T. McCutcheon, "A Battle the Izaak Walton League Is Winning," *Outdoor America* 4, no. 12 (July 1926): 4.

fundamental to the angling “brotherhood” that Walton had portrayed centuries earlier. And by proclaiming the author of *The Compleat Angler* as the new organization’s tutelary genius, the upstart Izaak Walton League deftly capitalized on Walton’s abiding popularity during its highly effective branding campaign in the 1920s. But we should not simply (dis)regard the League’s self-serving appropriation of Walton and his angling treatise as a popular, early twentieth-century—and thus misguided and outmoded—example of “presentism.”¹⁶ For in their lived response to Walton’s famous book, the founders of the Izaak Walton League of America gave material form to insights that have often been missing from scholarly assessments of *The Compleat Angler*.

Although his anglers’ fish-centric discussions of the natural world make up the bulk of Walton’s text, literary historians have paid surprisingly little attention to the environmental emphasis of *The Compleat Angler*. Fixated narrowly on oceans, scholars affiliated with the “blue cultural studies” have overlooked Walton’s depiction of riparian ecosystems, while works of environmentally inflected literary history as a whole continue to uphold the canon—and the imperatives of academic job security and professional prestige—by teasing out ecological references in Shakespeare and Milton rather than examine a popular fishing treatise in which the natural world holds center stage.¹⁷ Thus, most recent commentators continue to read *The Compleat Angler* through a New Historicist lens that focuses on Walton’s veiled criticism of interregnum religion and politics. From this perspective, Walton’s book primarily constitutes a conservative “polemic,” and therefore the “naturalist materials” that predominate in *The Compleat Angler* should be interpreted (and then ignored) as “the occasion of the book rather than the center of its argument.”¹⁸ Walton had staunchly supported the beleaguered monarchy during the British Civil Wars, going so far as to risk imprisonment or execution by serving as a royalist agent after the Battle of Worcester in 1651, and he remained a Prayer Book loyalist throughout the 1650s.¹⁹ Although these traditional allegiances certainly shape some aspects of *The Compleat Angler*, in other ways the experiences of Walton’s anglers in the Hertfordshire countryside question both the moral fortitude of the English church and the ideological underpinnings of the abolished Stuart monarchy. And Walton’s multifaceted portrayal of the natural environment never functions solely as the vehicle of religiopolitical commentary. Because “nature and culture are mutually constitutive,” concepts of nature are necessarily “ideas

of kinds of societies” and vice versa: thus, only by analyzing Walton’s complex, interwoven depiction of both the biosphere and his fishermen’s social world can we understand the rich and distinctive ecosocial vision presented in *The Compleat Angler*.²⁰

Walton first published his angling treatise for a readership that inhabited “an early modern world of scarcity and uncertainty” wracked by environmental crises.²¹ In the middle of the seventeenth century, “the earth experienced some of the coldest weather recorded in over a millennium” during an especially severe phase of the Little Ice Age, a period of unusually cold, wet, and unstable weather that caused crop failures, food shortages, and disease throughout the Northern Hemisphere.²² These dire conditions gave English landowners added impetus to fulfill more intensively what they regarded as their God-given mandate to exert human dominion over the earth, and initiatives designed to increase agricultural productivity (and profits)—enclosure, drainage of wetlands, felling of trees, and cultivation of wastes—destroyed both rural ecosystems and human communities. The misery produced by the Little Ice Age exacerbated the religious and political unrest that would culminate in the civil wars, and militarized conflict further ravaged the natural environment.²³ Perpetually searching for new sources of revenue, King Charles I had opportunistically mismanaged forests and sold vast numbers of oak trees, and as combat raged during the 1640s deer parks were repeatedly invaded by both soldiers and discontented local residents, with thousands of deer slaughtered and trees felled.²⁴ When hostilities finally ceased in 1651, hedges and orchards had been cleared for miles beyond the defenses of fortified towns, warfare had destroyed crops and livestock, and forests, parks, and chases had been devastated. Yet this period of armed combat also inadvertently produced environmental benefits. Although wildlife decreased overall during the seventeenth century, so many men left Caernarvonshire to fight for the king “that the Justices of the Peace had to offer a 10-shilling bounty for killing foxes, hunting them having ceased due to the war.”²⁵ And during the blockade of Newcastle in 1643–44, when Londoners could no longer obtain coal, the clouds of sulfurous smoke that normally choked the English capital were so reduced that chronically stunted and sickly plants “were observed to bear such plentiful and infinite quantities of Fruits, as they never produced the like either before or since.”²⁶ Ironically, however, this wartime amelioration of London’s air quality came at the cost of increased deforestation as impoverished and

desperate residents of the city resorted to cutting down trees for fuel, with Parliament authorizing the “organized plunder” of royalist-owned woodlands located within sixty miles of London.²⁷

The tumult of the civil wars also intensified emergent challenges to long-standing environmental worldviews. According to early modern English orthodoxy, whether acting as agricultural improvers, aristocratic hunters, or Baconian scientists, men who exploited the natural world were simply fulfilling their Christian duty to restore (patriarchal) human control over the postlapsarian earth. Yet this “breathtakingly anthropocentric” vision of the natural world as “redolent with human analogy and symbolic meanings” was increasingly undermined by new concepts of nature as “autonomous, only to be understood in non-human terms.”²⁸ Keith Thomas argues that “the explicit acceptance of the view that the world does not exist for man alone can be fairly regarded as one of the great revolutions in modern Western thought,” and during Walton’s lifetime the stirrings of this paradigm shift catalyzed a deepening “crisis of distinctions” between the human and the nonhuman.²⁹ Some of Walton’s contemporaries wistfully imagined how they might escape from the demands of normative heterosexuality and become more like plants, able to experience the asexual innocence of “vegetable love” and thus “procreate like trees, without conjunction.”³⁰ Others argued that animals—even fish—possess reason and language, capacities long regarded as the defining characteristics of human superiority.³¹

Such challenges to man’s status as the earthly apex of the Great Chain of Being became even more explicit and radical during the civil wars. In the mid-1640s, the vituperative Presbyterian clergyman Thomas Edwards included in his catalog of the “Errours of the Sectaries” the heretical statement that men should regard themselves as “no better then was meet, for God loves the creatures that creep upon the ground as well as the best Saints and there is no distance between the flesh of a Man, and the flesh of a Toad.”³² The Ranter Jacob Bauthumley published in 1650 what Edwards would have regarded as a sectarian nightmare, a tract in which Bauthumley declared that “God is in all Creatures, Man and Beast, Fish and Fowle, and every green thing, from the highest Cedar to the Ivey on the wall.”³³ Bauthumley’s attack on anthropocentrism threatened to eradicate traditional forms of religious authority, so all copies of his impious book were ordered to be incinerated, and Bauthumley himself was burned through the tongue with a hot iron as punishment for his blasphemy.³⁴ Although Izaak Walton’s

unorthodox ideas never attracted such violent opposition, his marginalization during the interregnum likewise enabled Walton to think innovatively about humankind's place in God's creation.³⁵ In the face of a polarized society devastated by warfare, climate change, ecological degradation, hunger, and disease, Walton used *The Compleat Angler* to develop an audacious model of a new kind of community in which men's love of the natural world—not fealty to the church, the state, or the family—becomes the foundation of both individual identity and social order. And in the process, Walton created one of the most innovative and influential environmental texts ever written.³⁶

The chapters that follow analyze *The Compleat Angler* as a uniquely complex—and compelling—exploration of humankind's ecosocial existence. As chapter 1 details, Walton's fishing treatise presents a kaleidoscopic wealth of early modern perspectives on a wonderfully heterogeneous natural world. Walton was a staunch adherent of the prewar Church of England, and an Anglican-inflected Christian anthropocentrism thus pervades much of his book.³⁷ A devout mode of meditation underpins the joyful apprehension of numinosity that Walton's fishermen often experience in the English countryside, and many of the most famous passages in *The Compleat Angler* are imbued with what Todd Borlik helpfully terms "eco-spirituality."³⁸ The religiosity of Walton's text frequently modulates into versions of the pastoral mode; but as one would expect from a how-to manual, *The Compleat Angler* encompasses even more types of georgic, and Walton's anglers formulate nascent concepts of ecology, conservation, and sustainability as they seek to harvest fish within bountiful ecosystems subjected—like Izaak Walton himself—to the harsh weather that often battered seventeenth-century England during the Little Ice Age.

As Walton's doppelgänger-protagonist Piscator tries to catch fish, he revolutionizes English angling by transforming the sport into a sociable activity. Chapter 2 examines how Walton, rejecting the time-honored stereotype of the solitary fisherman, creates a convivial "brotherhood" of anglers both within and beyond his book. Just as the upheaval of civil war catalyzed new ways of thinking about humanity's relationship with the natural environment, so Walton, like many of his contemporaries during the interregnum, also imagined new kinds of social bonds. Drawing on familiar organizational models from both the religious and secular spheres, Piscator fosters in his community of anglers an unorthodox voluntary association rooted

in its members' shared experiences of the outdoors. Piscator cannot, however, include elite men who dabble in Baconian science within the ranks of his angling fraternity. And like his biographies of notable Anglicans, Walton's fishing treatise is pervaded by unease about women, so the innovative model of ecosocial relationships developed in *The Compleat Angler* also remains staunchly female-free. Thus both Piscator and Walton are limited by early modern concepts of rank and gender when they seek converts to "turn Angler" and join their "brotherhood" of outdoorsmen.

Fishers of men must also be feeders of men in Walton's book, and chapter 3 analyzes the omnipresent fascination with food central to *The Compleat Angler*. Piscator flourishes as the paterfamilias of the Brotherhood of the Angle because he excels at providing irresistible meals to fish and fishermen alike. Both legitimizing and politicizing the piscivorous diet he advocates, Walton allies his protagonist's feats of fish cookery with those of Christ in the New Testament while also evoking the "fish days" proscribed during the interregnum. Yet fish was regarded as a dangerous foodstuff in the early modern period, and the recipes that Piscator provides—many of them also reflecting the continental cuisine associated with royalism—seek to minimize the adverse effects of fish consumption on human health. Since food preparation was stereotyped as demeaning women's work, however, Walton must simultaneously strive to portray Piscator's expertise in fish cookery as respectably masculine. Above all, Walton insists that his anglers inhabit a providentially bountiful natural world in which God miraculously feeds some creatures and generates others from the very food they eat—a protoecological dynamic paralleled in the genesis of the Brotherhood of the Angle itself.

The life of the Staffordshire gentleman Charles Cotton attests to the power of Izaak Walton's influence as an environmental thinker and writer during the early modern period. In the spring of 1676, as a personal favor to Walton, Cotton hastily wrote a treatise about fly-fishing. Included with the final edition of Walton's book as Part II of *The Compleat Angler*, Cotton's pioneering text—the first specialized fly-fishing manual ever published—remains a touchstone for modern fly fishermen. Perhaps because of its stylistic clarity and continued usefulness as a how-to book, Part II of *The Compleat Angler* has received little scholarly attention beyond narrowly focused histories of recreational fishing. Chapter 4 remedies this deficiency by analyzing Cotton's treatise as a work of imaginative literature that honors

yet also conservatively revises the ecosocial dynamics of Izaak Walton's book. Whereas Walton's anglers deliberately bypass the Theobalds estate (and thus reject the aristocratic modes of environmental and social domination it represents) as they head into Hertfordshire, Cotton's fishermen visit his country house in Beresford Dale, an oasis of elite civilization on the banks of the River Dove located amid the rugged, intimidating terrain of the Peak District. Extending the membership dynamics of Walton's Brotherhood of the Angle, Cotton's protagonist Piscator Junior paradoxically invests the patrimonial resources of his estate so he may forge a nonlinear identity for himself as Izaak Walton's adopted son. Yet as Piscator Junior creates dozens of artificial flies from an amazing (and often exotic) array of furs, feathers, textiles, and precious metals, he channels the ethos of patrician environmental mastery emblemized by Theobalds into a new, explicitly genteel practice of fly-tying. Thus, rather than emulate his foster father Izaak Walton and forage for bait in a numinous English countryside teeming with invertebrates, Charles Cotton transforms the natural world into a globalized bazaar that caters to the rarefied tastes of a cosmopolitan landed elite—even in such an unlikely place as the Peak.

Cotton's depiction of fly-fishing as socially superior to bait-fishing finally renders his relationship with Izaak Walton equivocal, a dynamic that likewise shapes Norman Maclean's autobiographical novella *A River Runs Through It*. The epilogue of this study explores how Maclean uses *The Compleat Angler* to complicate what ecotheorist Joseph Meeker would term the "literary ecology" of Maclean's narrative. Depicting his brother Paul as a brilliant but troubled fly fisherman who lives by a destructive code of masculine self-sufficiency, Maclean portrays Walton's seventeenth-century angling treatise as the source text of a life-affirming worldview that could save his brother—but Paul seals his tragic fate by refusing to embrace the sustaining (and sustainable) mode of male identity modeled in *The Compleat Angler*. Maclean's celebrated story thus demonstrates the ongoing relevance and cultural vitality of Izaak Walton's vision of an environmentally rooted habitus that draws human beings into communion with both the natural world and one another.