

**TROUBLED TRIBUTARIES: ALBERTA ANGLERS, FISH FIGHTS, AND THE RACE TO SAVE MOUNTAIN COLDWATER STREAMS, 1900-1930**

by George Colpitts

ISBN 978-1-77385-689-6

**THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK.** It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at [ucpress@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ucpress@ucalgary.ca)

**Cover Art:** The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

**COPYRIGHT NOTICE:** This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

**UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:**

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

**UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:**

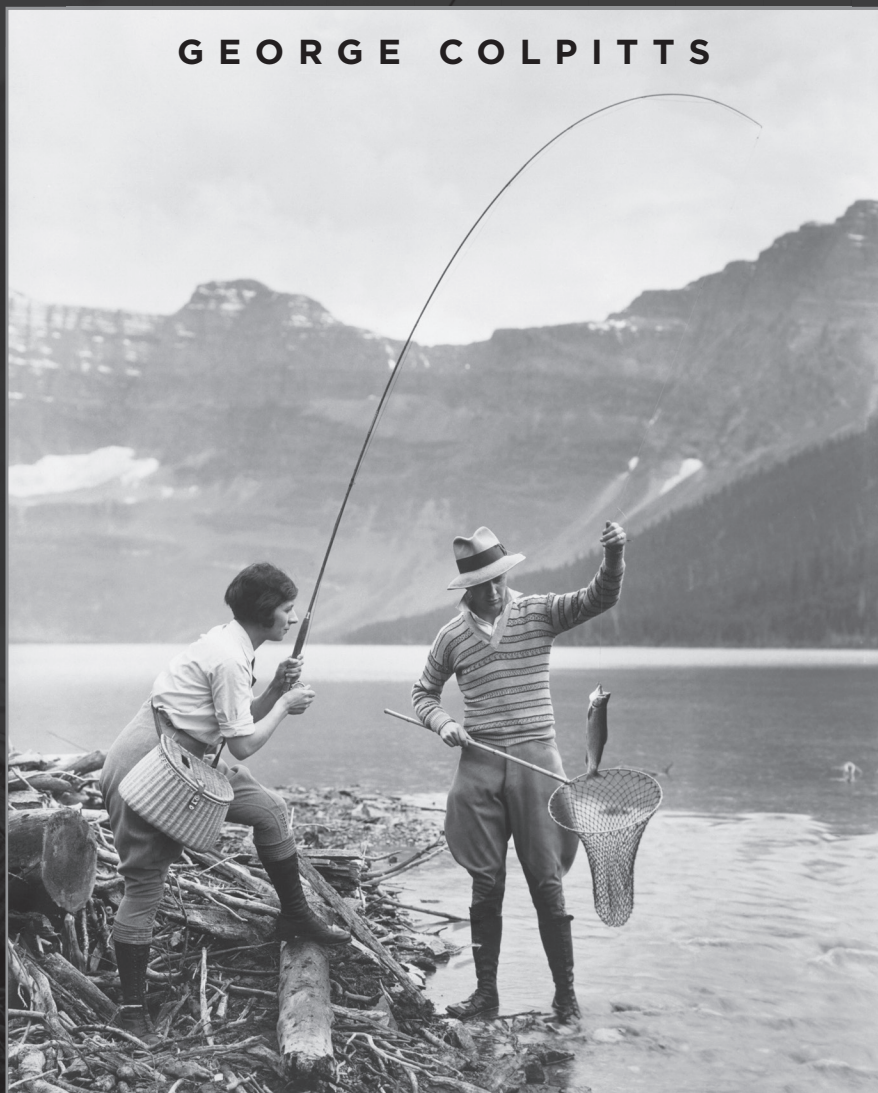
- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



**Acknowledgement:** We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, **re.press**, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>

# *Troubled Tributaries*

GEORGE COLPITTS



Alberta Anglers, Fish Fights, and the Race to Save  
Mountain Coldwater Streams, 1900-1930

*Troubled Tributaries*





# *Troubled Tributaries*

GEORGE COLPITTS

Alberta Anglers, Fish Fights, and the Race to Save  
Mountain Coldwater Streams, 1900-1930

© 2026 George Colpitts

Bighorn Books  
An imprint of University of Calgary Press  
2500 University Drive NW  
Calgary, Alberta  
Canada T2N 1N4  
press.ucalgary.ca

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any format whatsoever without prior written permission from the publisher, except for brief excerpts quoted in scholarship or review.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Title: Troubled tributaries : Alberta anglers, fish fights, and the race to save mountain coldwater streams, 1900–1930 / George Colpitts.

Names: Colpitts, George, 1964- author

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20250321157 | Canadiana (ebook) 20250321165 | ISBN 9781773856858 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781773856865 (softcover) | ISBN 9781773856872 (EPUB) | ISBN 9781773856896 (Open Access PDF) | ISBN 9781773856889 (PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Fishes—Conservation—Alberta—History—20th century. | LCSH: Stream conservation—Alberta—History—20th century. | LCSH: Fishers—Alberta—History—20th century. | LCSH: Fly fishing—Alberta—History—20th century.

Classification: LCC SH224.A4 C65 2026 | DDC 333.95/609712309041—dc23

This project was funded in part by the Government of Alberta and its Heritage Preservation Partnership Program. The University of Calgary Press acknowledges the support of the Government of Alberta through the Alberta Media Fund for our publications. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada. We acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program.

*Alberta*

Canada



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



CERTIFIED  
CANADIAN  
PUBLISHER

The manufacturer's authorized representative in the EU for product safety is Mare Nostrum Group B.V., Mauritskade 21D, 1091 GC Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Email: gpsr@mare-nostrum.co.uk

Copy-editing by Peter Midgley

Cover image: Catching a fish, Waterton Lakes, ca. 1920s. W. J. Oliver collection, NA-4868-1390s, Glenbow Library and Archives.

Cover design, page design, and typesetting by Melina Cusano

# *Contents*

List of Illustrations	vii
List of Maps	viii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	1
1   The Pioneer Era and the End of Superabundance	13
2   Saving Calgary's Fish After the Great War	33
3   Tending the Highwood's Underwater Gardens	55
4   Stewards of Streams in Southern Alberta	87
5   The Great Arbitrator: The Banff Hatchery	117
6   The Bow Fishery, Baitcasting, and Modern Camping in the Rockies	141
Conclusion	155
Notes	163
Bibliography	199
Index	213



*Fly Box and Flies, Mr. CE Butterfield Collection,  
Collection of Glenbow (10498), Photograph by George Colpitts.*

## *List of Illustrations*

Figure 0.1: Pekisko Creek, ca. 1923	3
Figure 1.1: Waterton Lakes, ca. 1920s	16
Figure 1.2: Spray Falls, Rocky Mountains Park, 1928	24
Figure 1.3: “A Bow River Comedy,” 1904	26
Figure 1.4: Robert Darker	28
Figure 2.1: Fishing Gear and Canoe	43
Figure 2.2: Alex. Martin Sporting Goods, 1913	48
Figure 3.1: Daisy MacGregor, 1918	57
Figure 3.2: The Highwood Valley	62
Figure 3.3: Distributing Fry on the Highwood	66
Figure 3.4: Hunting Party on the EP Ranch	68
Figure 4.1: Callum Creek	93
Figure 4.2: John and Jim Kerr	107
Figure 5.1: A Catch at Minnewanka, 1890s	120
Figure 5.2: “Stripping” at Spray Lakes	123
Figure 5.3: The Banff Hatchery, ca. 1920	125
Figure 5.4: Waterton’s Hatchery	133
Figure 6.1: Fishing Near Banff	142
Figure 6.2: Fishing for Trout in Lake Louise	146
Figure 6.3: A Catch at Minnewanka, 1923	150

## *List of Maps*

Map 0.1: Major Rivers in Alberta	8
Map 2.1: The Bow and Highwood Rivers, with Tributaries	37
Map 4.1: The Oldman Basin, Rivers and Tributaries	88

## *Preface*

Sometime before dawn on 28 July 2010, High River's museum caught fire. Housed in an old railway station originally built in 1893, the Museum of the Highwood had withstood the tests of time. Given its age, it was something of a miracle that the building wasn't destroyed. All the same, the collection was nearly ruined by the smoke and, ironically, by the sprinklers that doused the flames.

Hearing the news on the radio the next day, I headed south from Calgary to see if I could lend a hand. Other people had had the same idea. In the crowded parking lot, volunteers were milling around triage tents, piecing together and boxing up salvaged artifacts. An awning, flapping in the wind, sheltered flats of bottled water. No one had much time to stand around, however. A co-ordinator hurriedly suited me up in protective white plastic coveralls, hardhat, goggles, and a stifflingly hot mask. Now duded in my own search-and-rescue outfit, I joined others entering the building to retrieve anything that could be saved.

Volunteers had already cleared most of the main floor, so I worked with a couple of others in the basement. We followed electrical cords to emergency lights propped here and there on steel stands in the bowels of the building. Water pooled on the wooden steps and across the large cement boiler-room floor.

Here was the community's morgue of material culture. There were water-soaked saddles, boxes upon boxes of vintage milk bottles from the 1950s, rodeo event trophies, musical instruments, typewriters, and 1920s radios. Something struck me while attending them: the Museum of the Highwood preserved the pastimes, passions, and profits pursued along the Highwood River, which flows right through High River. Not many communities build museums in honour of their rivers.

As I lugged heavy brass spittoons and kerosene burners to the truck outside, I began thinking about that. High River was, and is, a fishing

community. Its special relationship to fish seems to set High River apart from agricultural towns farther east, especially in the drier irrigation districts of the prairies. For well over a century, town citizens ardently defended their river to preserve its angling. The folks in High River took up fish conservation a lot earlier than most people now realize.

A few months later, serendipitously, Calgary's Chinook Country Historical Society asked me to speak about early trout conservation in Southern Alberta. Although I had written on the topic in the past, it had been years since I had even thought about anglers and fish conservation. Nevertheless, the fire at the museum started me thinking about how quickly stories are lost. While preparing for the talk, I revisited notes taken during visits to Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, where I had discovered boxes and boxes of letters and reports sent to the Department of Marine and Fisheries by members of local angling associations in Alberta before 1930. Given the challenges of navigating the murky depths of the fisheries archives, it was perhaps not surprising that much of the correspondence had largely languished unread. But opening the files, I had found anglers opining on the characteristics of Alberta's native fish and sharing their alarms about conservation and fisheries policy. It was impressive to me that anglers were hardly of a single mind about how to save their streams from overfishing, how to protect native favourites, how to jigger with season dates to promote certain fish and discourage others, and whether to introduce exotic species and, if so, which ones. In my talk, then, I ended up discussing not only the aims of but also the squabbles among early conservationists, whose infighting revealed the varying perspectives on nature that animated them in those years.

After the talk, an individual came forward. He worked with numerous groups of conservationists concerned with, among other things, the proliferation of exotics in the province and the drift toward privatizing access to fish and game resources. The story I had told that night was playing out in Alberta streams in the present, he said, impressing on me the importance of telling it to a larger audience. The lecture was thirty-five minutes long. But those two events—my talk and the burning of the museum—got me thinking and writing. This book grew from that.

## *Acknowledgements*

This work started with the research I conducted for my master's thesis, and so I must thank Donald B. Smith, my supervisor and great friend ever since, for setting a high standard for the historian's craft. He remains a great source of inspiration. At Parks Canada, I am indebted to Steve Mahlins, with National Historic Sites, and, particularly, to historian Meg Stanley, for all their help. I am grateful to Pamela Holway for her many suggestions for improvements to my drafts. I am also grateful to Peter Midgley for his copy-editing. I must also acknowledge the anglers, conservationists, and fish biologists who took time to read and give comments on drafts and who caught a variety of blunders on my part. Larry Cromwell, Lorne Fitch, Dale Kastelen, Mark Konnert, Bruce Masterman, Les Oystryk, Jim Stelfox, and Kevin van Tighem all helped me a great deal, and I can't thank them enough. I'm also appreciative of Don Smith and Warren Elofson's reading and commenting on the final manuscript.

Many individuals at the Glenbow Archives (now the Glenbow Library and Archival Collections at the University of Calgary) have provided inestimable assistance over the years. Thanks must go to Doug Cass, Lindsay Moir, and Susan Kooyman, still remembered for their amazing work at the Glenbow. Marcia Slater, also at the Glenbow, and then Katelin Karbonik guided me in the back rooms of the Glenbow to view and photograph the museum's early rods, reels, and tackle, especially those of the Boyce collection. Allison Wagner, senior rare books and manuscript advisor at the University of Calgary, was also very helpful. Members of the staff at Library and Archives Canada patiently shepherded me through the records of the Department of Marine and Fisheries (now Fisheries and Oceans Canada), where this book really got its start. A grant provided by the Alberta Heritage Resources Foundation helped me undertake additional research many years ago.

This book could not have been published without a book publishing grant from the Heritage Preservation Partnership Program of Alberta Arts, Culture and Status of Women.

A special thanks must go to the Eleanor Luxton Historical Foundation in Banff. The work I joined in the directors' activities and initiatives was inspirational while I was writing early drafts of this book. For their vision of Western Canadian history, I can't thank enough Astrid Bell, Marjory Gibney, Harvey Locke, Bill and Dianne Luxton, Peter Poole, and Terry White. Many colleagues have also helped me develop, correct, and refine my thinking about fish. Matthew Evenden's work on fisheries and aquatic life in the Bow River prompted me to reread my sources within their respective watersheds. Colleagues within the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE), and especially Alan MacEachern and others, have meaningfully influenced how I think about people, places and ecological change in Alberta's historic fisheries. I am also grateful to the people I met when I conducted research in the Highwood River area many years ago—ranchers, farmers, and people from High River and Longview who helped me see their river, and the rivers of the Eastern Slopes, for what they really were: social meeting places as well as waterways. During that project, it was a pleasure to receive guidance from both Lillian Knupp and Don King from High River.

Francine Michaud, with her constant encouragement and insight, helped me see this book to completion. She also provided a great deal of copy-editing of many drafts. And I'm particularly grateful to Gabriel, my son. Gabe makes me realize, always, that these rivers flow from one generation to the next with different meanderings and meanings. They never lose their power to connect time and place in Western Canada.