

# Check Your Fly

## Tales of a

BY RACHAEL CROWDER

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Fly fishing is genteel: we present beautiful fly imitations, carefully constructed of bits of fur and feather to fool the fish into thinking it is their favourite aquatic creature.

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*Cet article dénonce le sport très masculin de la pêche à la mouche du point de vue d'une femme. Elle nous raconte son incursion dans le monde macho de la pêche à la mouche, les difficiles expériences dans les compétitions du lancer de la ligne, la construction sociale de la compétition et finalement sa décision de monter son propre club de «pêcheurs à la mouche».*

I am a fly fisher. This aspect of my personality has become almost as important to me as my gender and the various gender roles I play (mother, grandmother, sister) as well as my identity as a

feminist, a social worker and social activist. Certainly I see how these roles are interconnected, especially because I am a woman who has infiltrated a male-dominated sport just as I am a woman who has worked for equality for women in a patriarchal society. My social work career and education has focused on violence against women, sexual violence in particular, and how violence is a tool for excluding women from active participation in society. So it makes sense that I am passionate about the politics of my female presence in a male dominated society, whether it is my local fly fishing club, or western society in general.

As I age I come to understand more completely how gender is socially constructed as are race, class, disability, sexuality etc. in order to “other” people from the constructed social norm, or what Didi Khayatt calls “the “default position” in society” i.e. white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied. It is from this default location that the Ottawa Flyfishers Society (OFS) hegemony can define themselves, and when a woman enters such a men’s world they no longer have such a clear definition of who they are or what masculinity is, especially if she is a woman who excels in a field of activity by which they define themselves. There are many aspects of this small “society” that mirror the larger western society in a concentrated way which makes it a useful and interesting subject for a study of one’s place in society. It gives one an opportunity to look at gender roles, class and race issues and sexual orientation, which I will explore as I

weave my tale as a woman survivor of the Ottawa Flyfishers Society.

### Herstory of women in fly fishing

In spite of the fact that fly fishing is male dominated, there is a history of women in the sport. The earliest writings about fly fishing were written by a religious woman in the fifteenth century. Dame Juliana Berners was a nun and a noblewoman who wrote the first fly fishing essay called *The Treatise of Fishing with an Angle* 1421 (Morris). Many other famous women have been recorded and sometimes photographed pursuing this activity, partially because of their fame in other areas of society, but mostly because of the novelty of seeing a woman with a fly rod in her hand. The Queen Mother of Britain and Rosalind Carter (wife of American ex-President Jimmy Carter) are two women who illustrate this cross-over. Old photos of Victorian Englishwomen fishing in long skirts are not uncommon in the national archives of Canada or Britain. Photos of women who bend gender norms are also popular, such as the women who were guides and dressed in attire more acceptable among men than women of the era. I have also been a subject of interest, and have been written up and photographed for both the *Globe and Mail* and *The Ottawa Citizen*. I don’t fall into the “famous” category, but I am certainly considered an anomaly and a curiosity by the general public, and by my brother fly fishers as well.

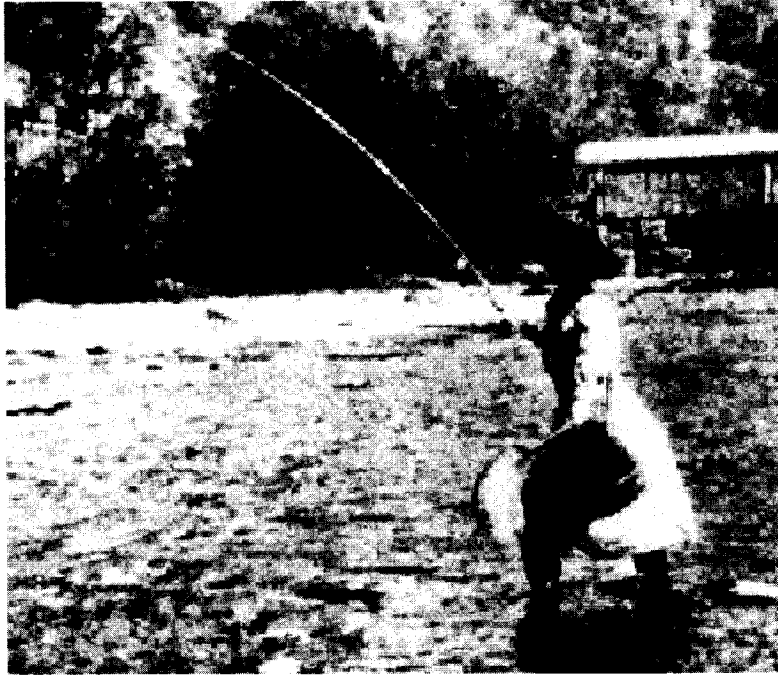
### The privilege of spare time

What I share with my more famous sister anglers as well as brother anglers is a certain class privilege that results from having leisure time. As Marilyn Waring has illustrated (Waring 1988) women’s work in and attached to the home has been the invisible subsidy that has allowed men the time to goof off. It is so common for a man to be “gone fishing” that it is a cultural cliché: a metaphor for all kinds of escapist activities engaged in by men who don’t want to share the responsibilities of family, childcare and domestic work, and occasionally their paid employment. These Victorian women I mention above were usually wealthy and likely had nannies and housekeepers. Those who were not wealthy and chose a fishing lifestyle as guides and “trout bums,” were women who chose to

# Woman Fly Fisher

remain child-free. Many of them chose to dress, talk and behave like men and in the literature they appear unencumbered by male relationships, and children.

My own experience has also been one of increased mobility, wealth, and choice. I chose to stop producing babies at a certain age, and it happened successfully and permanently because I have access to health care. As my children aged and left home, the wage earning power of my partner and I increased. I have much less interest in any expectations (his or society's) about being my partner's personal care-giver or general housekeeping standards. All that is to say: I have time and money to fish.



*On a Canadian river, circa 1880*

## **It's about class**

Within the fly fishing society, there is a hierarchy of fishers. Many around the globe fish to feed themselves and their families, from small scale subsistence fishers to large commercial fish harvesters. In the hierarchy they are not considered part of the "sport." Sport fishers *may* keep and eat their catch, but they don't rely on it to make ends meet. If fishing is mainly an escapist activity, sometimes actually catching a fish can be an annoying interruption to contemplation on the river, an afternoon nap in the boat, or the ongoing quest to catch that lunker.

Fly fishers see themselves at the top of the fishing hierarchy. We see ourselves as thoughtful people, intelligent and sensitive. Fishers who do not have these qualities are often referred to as "hardware fishermen" or "bait-chuckers." They are seen as less intelligent and therefore need to resort to cruder measures to catch fish; that is, using bait and large pieces of shiny, spinning metal. Fly fishing is genteel: we present beautiful fly imitations, carefully constructed of bits of fur and feather crafted to fool the fish into thinking it is their favourite bug or other aquatic creature. We study entomology to understand the cycle of insect life so we know what to present to the fish. We study river ecology, we study fish habitat and migration, we study meteorology, we study

rods, reels, lines and anything else we think will improve our intelligence and odds of catching a fish who has an I.Q. of about eight.

Ironically, we think that because we study so hard to catch fish, we are smarter than the "bait chuckers" who spend a tenth of the money we do on equipment and their study time on other activities. We exhibit classism by defining ourselves as "smart" as opposed to those working class folk whom we deem "not so smart" (we're too genteel to use the word stupid) because they buy their sporting goods at Walmart instead of the local fly shop. We have constructed a "particular code and set of signifiers that describe working-class people" (Kadi) within the fly fishing hierarchy

When I look at the majority of fly fishers on the water and in our club, I see mostly middle and higher-class men. Most are university educated, many are professionals — doctors, lawyers, accountants, executives — and many spend thousands of dollars on their sport. My newly acquired privilege is not comparable to the standard of living most of these guys enjoy. I have earned my fly fishing equipment by working at a fly shop and as a fishing guide. I do not have the discretionary cash that these men have because I am at the low-end of the socio-economic scale of this hierarchy and a somewhat recent cross-over

from a working class lifestyle. It's easy to see how the "other" is constructed to boost self-esteem and affirm our notions that we deserve what we have because we've worked so hard. As Khayatt remarks, "the identity of those in power, in order to be affirmed, relies on its relationship to those against whom they can define themselves." (Khayatt).

### My herstory as a fly fisher

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My fly fishing journey began about six years ago. Our last child was out of the nest, and my partner and I were beginning to enjoy having more time to call our own. Since 1991 we have taken two weeks of the summer to be on Grand Manan, a lovely maritime island in the Bay of Fundy. Our rental cottage sits on an expanse of empty beach beside a fresh water pond alive with cavorting fish. From the beginning I was curious about what kind of fish they were. I attempted on a couple of occasions to catch them using spin-casting fishing rods that my male children had col-

lected over the years, with no success. Being a thinking woman, I thought there had to be a more scientific way to approach this problem, so I turned to the idea of fly fishing as a way to approach the catching of fish. I began to read voraciously, trying not to be discouraged by the constant references to fly fisher*men* and male images in articles and advertising. In many ways I was used to not seeing my gender represented in mainstream media (with the exception of sexy women selling cars and so forth), so I put my annoyance aside in order to gather the information I wanted and needed.

I started my search for a teacher at a local fly fishing shop. The proprietor seemed more annoyed about having me infiltrate his space than willing to serve me as a customer. This was to be the first of many such experiences. He suggested that if I was looking for instruction, I try the annual "Sport*men's* Show" (there's that language again!). The following February I convinced my male partner to accompany me to the show. He's not into fishing, hunting, or any of those stereotypical male activities, but has always been slightly amused by and supportive of my patriarchy—resistance activities. He went along for the ride. It was an interesting experience to be at a hunting and fishing show as a heterosexual couple where the usual gender roles were reversed. We would approach a booth, I would ask a question, and the man in the booth would answer my partner. On a couple of occasions, my partner physically placed me between

the man in the booth and himself, looked at the guy and said, "Talk to *her*. She's the one who asked the question. I couldn't care less."

### Competition as social construction

I finally did find my teacher, and took my lessons the following spring. I also discovered that I had a natural talent for fly fishing, especially for casting, and my teacher encouraged me to enter fly casting competitions. So here I was back at the "Sportsmen's Show" the following year as a neophyte fly caster, entering the National Capital Dry Fly Accuracy Casting Competition sponsored in part by the Ottawa Flyfishers Society. Much to the chagrin of many of my brother competitors, some of whom had been casting for decades, I came in third. In following years, my brothers attempted to create a women's division, which I fought against. I have my reasons. Fly casting accuracy requires speed and timing, not a lot of strength, which is why women can do as well as (or better than) men. Women can also be very effective distance casters. Joan Salvato Wulff held 17 national casting titles in the U.S. including a distance casting competition (144 feet) against an all-male field in 1951. She was not a large woman, but she was a trained dancer who knew about timing, balance and speed. She is a brilliant fly fisher, a well-respected teacher and writer. So while there are no physiological reasons why women might need a women's division of competition, I know that creating competition according to gender can have the affect of making competition more comfortable or accessible to greater numbers of female competitors. However, the choice should be ours, not the result of fear on the part of male co-competitors. We have the right to compete in a field of our "peers" to gain an accurate benchmark for our progress in the sport. Personally, as a competitor, I could say it's not about winning, but I'd be lying. I like beating men, so I prefer to compete against men rather than women. As a girl I was socialized to be competitive for male attention, but I refuse to buy into that as a woman. But I still, unfortunately, buy into the notion of competition.

Competition is an interesting activity. It's a place where nature and nurture intersect, where Darwinism and Capitalism hold hands and chuckle. Competitive sports is about who has the superior genetic makeup (Darwin) and who has access to the scarce resources (Marx on capitalism) i.e. leisure time, best training and equipment. It is a social construction by which we create categories of excellence to define ourselves against an "other." When I win in an open casting competition, I feel like I've cracked open the Old Boys Network just a little, sent the Darwinists and Capitalists fumbling through their research papers, scratching their heads. Unfortunately I am "using the tools of the master," and trying to justify this by saying I'm deconstructing the master's appellation. I struggle with this.

## Gender studies: Fly fishing 101

Fly fishing has been very liberating for me in many ways. Part of that is through building new skill sets around self-sufficiency, personal power, safety and independence. There is also a strong connection between it and my love of nature and my spirituality, and fly fishing has become integral to maintaining my mental health. It is an activity that has lots to offer women, and at the same time offers lots that repel women, as I have mentioned. Soon after discovering the joys of fly fishing I decided that I wanted to introduce more women to the sport in a safe, supportive and appealing way. I wanted women to have the opportunity to explore the liberating, empowering and spiritual aspects of the sport. Also, I value women's companionship a great deal, so I wanted women friends to fish with.

I decided that women in the area needed our own fly fishing club, so with the support of my good friend and fly fishing buddette Brenda Sharpe, we founded the Ottawa Women Fly Fishers. The idea was to introduce and teach women fly fishing, fly tying and other related activities, with lots of space for non-fly fishing chatter. We talk about stuff that the men at the other club never discuss, like personal tragedies, relationship problems and Martha Stewart (we have a lot of laughs at Martha's expense). The women also feel free to ask what they might feel are stupid questions. Many have remarked that the men in their lives have had the advantage of growing up fishing, and seem to just know how to do things and never have to ask. I think their observation illustrates the way we socialize and educate children (males in particular) in a way that tells them they can't ask questions without appearing "stupid". And "stupid" is a real class stigma as well as a gender stigma.

Our women members are extremely keen to learn. They want to know about knots, and flies, and leaders and all the paraphernalia that goes with fly fishing. They were so pumped to catch their first fish we couldn't wait to get them on the water. Finally, this summer when they did catch their first fish, Brenda and I were amazed that having the knowledge and skill to feed themselves was a very important part of attaining this goal. We had never admitted that aspect of it to ourselves, but we knew it was true. We could now bring home the fillet.

### Conclusion

I have presented the Ottawa Flyfishers Society in a fish bowl (pun intended) to illustrate how my life inside that society is a concentrated example of my life in the larger society. I have attempted to show how both hegemonies are structured in order to keep out the likes of me, a woman, and other persons identified as "other" by the relations of ruling (Smith). My story also serves as a kind of example of resistance by working within the system to bend the rules and set up alternative resources for those

who are excluded from the mainstream and don't wish to engage in the relations of ruling but still strive to have their interests and needs met. That was the purpose of creating the Ottawa Women Fly Fishers. Many of the women in our club have also joined the OFS in the last six months, and this is a good thing, as Martha would say. Male-dominated fly fishing clubs are the norm, and though "open" to women they will not, like the governments of countries dominated by men, represent nor care about women's interests until they are sufficiently populated by women members to create a shift in the imbalance of power (Waring 1996).

In the meantime, sisters are doing it for themselves, creating fly fishing clubs across the country and around the world. Two years ago the International Women Fly Fishers was created; fly fishing equipment manufacturers are starting to pay attention to our needs as we become a larger, more identifiable consumer group (that's what really counts in a Capitalist society), and more and more of us are taking our rightful place in the rivers and lakes of the world.

*Rachael Crowder is a fly fishing fanatic. She teaches and guides women through the labyrinth of fly fishing knowledge and paraphernalia, and is president and co-founder of Ottawa Women Fly Fishers ([www.owff.org](http://www.owff.org)). Between hatches (it's a fly fishing thing) she spends her non-fishing time writing, learning, teaching and practising the art of social work.*

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