

# LANG ANDREW

INTRODUCTION TO THE  
COMPLEAT ANGLER

Andrew Lang

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# **Andrew Lang**

## **Introduction to the Compleat Angler**

### **ANDREW LANG'S INTRODUCTION TO THE COMPLEAT ANGLER**

To write on Walton is, indeed, to hold a candle to the sun. The editor has been content to give a summary of the chief or rather the only known, events in Walton's long life, adding a notice of his character as displayed in his Biographies and in *The Compleat Angler*, with comments on the ancient and modern practice of fishing, illustrated by passages from Walton's foregoers and contemporaries. Like all editors of Walton, he owes much to his predecessors, Sir John Hawkins, Oldys, Major, and, above all, to the learned Sir Harris Nicolas.

## HIS LIFE

The few events in the long life of Izaak Walton have been carefully investigated by Sir Harris Nicolas. All that can be extricated from documents by the alchemy of research has been selected, and I am unaware of any important acquisitions since Sir Harris Nicolas's second edition of 1860. Izaak was of an old family of Staffordshire yeomen, probably descendants of George Walton of Yoxhall, who died in 1571. Izaak's father was Jarvis Walton, who died in February 1595-6; of Izaak's mother nothing is known. Izaak himself was born at Stafford, on August 9, 1593, and was baptized on September 21. He died on December 15, 1683, having lived in the reigns of Elizabeth, James I., Charles I., under the Commonwealth, and under Charles II. The anxious and changeful age through which he passed is in contrast with his very pacific character and tranquil pursuits.

Of Walton's education nothing is known, except on the evidence of his writings. He may have read Latin, but most of the books he cites had English translations. Did he learn his religion from 'his mother or his nurse'? It will be seen that the free speculation of his age left him untouched: perhaps his piety was awakened, from childhood, under the instruction of a pious mother. Had he been orphaned of both parents (as has been suggested) he might have been less amenable to authority, and a less notable example of the virtues which Anglicanism so vainly opposed to Puritanism. His literary beginnings are obscure. There exists a copy of a work, *The Loves of Amos and Laura*, written by S. P., published in 1613, and again in 1619. The edition of 1619 is dedicated to 'Iz. Wa.': —

'Thou being cause *it is as now it is*';

the Dedication does not occur in the one imperfect known copy of 1613. Conceivably the words, 'as now it is' refer to the edition of 1619, which might have been emended by Walton's advice. But there are no emendations, hence it is more probable that Walton revised the poem in 1613, when he was a man of twenty, or that he merely advised the author to publish: —

'For, hadst thou held thy tongue, by silence might  
These have been buried in oblivion's night.'

S. P. also remarks: —

'No ill thing can be clothed in thy verse';

hence Izaak was already a rhymer, and a harmless one, under the Royal Prentice, gentle King Jamie.

By this time Walton was probably settled in London. A deed in the possession of his biographer, Dr. Johnson's friend, Sir John Hawkins, shows that, in 1614, Walton held half of a shop on the north side of Fleet Street, two doors west of Chancery Lane: the other occupant was a hosier. Mr. Nicholl has discovered that Walton was made free of the Ironmongers' Company on Nov. 12, 1618. He is styled an Ironmonger in his marriage licence. The facts are given in Mr. Marston's Life of Walton, prefixed to his edition of *The Compleat Angler* (1888). It is odd that a prentice ironmonger should have been a poet and a critic of poetry. Dr. Donne, before 1614, was Vicar of St. Dunstan's in the West, and in Walton had a parishioner, a disciple, and a friend. Izaak greatly loved the society of the clergy: he connected himself with Episcopal families, and had a natural taste for a Bishop. Through Donne, perhaps, or it may be in converse across the counter, he made acquaintance with Hales of Eton, Dr. King, and Sir Henry Wotton, himself an angler, and one who, like Donne and Izaak, loved

a ghost story, and had several in his family. Drayton, the river-poet, author of the *Polyolbion*, is also spoken of by Walton as ‘my old deceased friend.’

On Dec. 27, 1626, Walton married, at Canterbury, Rachel Floud, a niece, on the maternal side, by several descents, of Cranmer, the famous Archbishop of Canterbury. The Cranmers were intimate with the family of the judicious Hooker, and Walton was again connected with kinsfolk of that celebrated divine. Donne died in 1631, leaving to Walton, and to other friends, a bloodstone engraved with Christ crucified on an anchor: the seal is impressed on Walton’s will. When Donne’s poems were published in 1633, Walton added commendatory verses: —

‘As all lament  
(Or should) this general cause of discontent.’

The parenthetic ‘or should’ is much in Walton’s manner. ‘Witness my mild pen, not used to upbraid the world,’ is also a pleasant and accurate piece of self-criticism. ‘I am his convert,’ Walton exclaims. In a citation from a manuscript which cannot be found, and perhaps never existed, Walton is spoken of as ‘a very sweet poet in his youth, and more than all in matters of love.’<sup>1</sup> Donne had been in the same case: he, or Time, may have converted Walton from amorous ditties. Walton, in an edition of Donne’s poems of 1635, writes of

‘This book (dry emblem) which begins  
With love; but ends with tears and sighs for sins.’

The preacher and his convert had probably a similar history of the heart: as we shall see, Walton, like the Cyclops, had known love. Early in 1639, Wotton wrote to Walton about a proposed Life of Donne, to be written by himself, and hoped ‘to enjoy your own ever welcome company in the approaching time of the *Fly* and the *Cork*.’ Wotton was a fly-fisher; the cork, or float, or ‘trembling quill,’ marks Izaak for the bottom-fisher he was. Wotton died in December 1639; Walton prefixed his own Life of Donne to that divine’s sermons in 1640. He says, in the Dedication of the reprint of 1658, that ‘it had the approbation of our late learned and eloquent King,’ the martyred Charles I. Living in, or at the corner of Chancery Lane, Walton is known to have held parochial office: he was even elected ‘scavenger.’ He had the misfortune to lose seven children – of whom the last died in 1641 – his wife, and his mother-in-law. In 1644 he left Chancery Lane, and probably retired from trade. He was, of course, a Royalist. Speaking of the entry of the Scots, who came, as one of them said, ‘for the goods, – and chattels of the English,’ he remarks, ‘I saw and suffered by it.’<sup>2</sup> He also mentions that he ‘saw’ shops shut by their owners till Laud should be put to death, in January 1645. In his Life of Sanderson, Walton vouches for an anecdote of ‘the knowing and conscientious King,’ Charles, who, he says, meant to do public penance for Strafford’s death, and for the abolishing of Episcopacy in Scotland. But the condition, ‘peaceable possession of the Crown,’ was not granted to Charles, nor could have been granted to a prince who wished to reintroduce Bishops in Scotland. Walton had his information from Dr. Morley. On Nov. 25, 1645, Walton probably wrote, though John Marriott signed, an Address to the Reader, printed, in 1646, with Quarles’s *Shepherd’s Eclogues*. The piece is a little idyll in prose, and ‘angle, lines, and flies’ are not omitted in the description of ‘the fruitful month of May,’ while Pan is implored to restore Arcadian peace to Britannia, ‘and grant that each honest shepherd may again sit under his own vine and fig-tree, and feed his own flock,’ when the King comes, no doubt. ‘About’ 1646 Walton married Anne, half-sister of Bishop Ken, a lady ‘of much Christian

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<sup>1</sup> The MS. was noticed in *The Freebooter*, Oct. 18, 1823, but Sir Harris Nicolas could not find it, where it was said to be, among the Lansdowne MSS.

<sup>2</sup> The quip about ‘goods and chattels’ was revived later, in the case of a royal mistress.

meekness.’ Sir Harris Nicolas thinks that he only visited Stafford occasionally, in these troubled years. He mentions fishing in ‘Shawford brook’; he was likely to fish wherever there was water, and the brook flowed through land which, as Mr. Marston shows, he acquired about 1656. In 1650 a child was born to Walton in Clerkenwell; it died, but another, Isaac, was born in September 1651. In 1651 he published the *Reliquiae Wottonianae*, with a Memoir of Sir Henry Wotton. The knight had valued Walton’s company as a cure for ‘those splenetic vapours that are called hypochondriacal.’

Worcester fight was on September 3, 1651; the king was defeated, and fled, escaping, thanks to a stand made by Wogan, and to the loyalty of Mistress Jane Lane, and of many other faithful adherents. A jewel of Charles’s, the lesser George, was preserved by Colonel Blague, who intrusted it to Mr. Barlow of Blore Pipe House, in Staffordshire. Mr. Barlow gave it to Mr. Milward, a Royalist prisoner in Stafford, and he, in turn, intrusted it to Walton, who managed to convey it to Colonel Blague in the Tower. The colonel escaped, and the George was given back to the king. Ashmole, who tells the story, mentions Walton as ‘well beloved of all good men.’ This incident is, perhaps, the only known adventure in the long life of old Izaak. The peaceful angler, with a royal jewel in his pocket, must have encountered many dangers on the highway. He was a man of sixty when he published his *Compleat Angler* in 1653, and so secured immortality. The quiet beauties of his manner in his various biographies would only have made him known to a few students, who could never have recognised Byron’s ‘quaint, old, cruel coxcomb’ in their author. ‘The whole discourse is a kind of picture of my own disposition, at least of my disposition in such days and times as I allow myself when honest Nat. and R. R. and I go a-fishing together.’ Izaak speaks of the possibility that his book may reach a second edition. There are now editions more than a hundred! Waltonians should read Mr. Thomas Westwood’s Preface to his *Chronicle of the Compleat Angler*: it is reprinted in Mr. Marston’s edition. Mr. Westwood learned to admire Walton at the feet of Charles Lamb: —

‘No fisher,  
But a well-wisher  
To the game,’  
as Scott describes himself.<sup>3</sup>

Lamb recommended Walton to Coleridge; ‘it breathes the very spirit of innocence, purity, and simplicity of heart;.. it would sweeten a man’s temper at any time to read it; it would Christianise every angry, discordant passion; pray make yourself acquainted with it.’ (Oct. 28, 1796.) According to Mr. Westwood, Lamb had ‘an early copy,’ found in a repository of marine stores, but not, even then, to be bought a bargain. Mr. Westwood fears that Lamb’s copy was only Hawkins’s edition of 1760. The original is extremely scarce. Mr. Locker had a fine copy; there is another in the library of Dorchester House: both are in their primitive livery of brown sheep, or calf. The book is one which only the wealthy collector can hope, with luck, to call his own. A small octavo, sold at eighteen-pence, *The Compleat Angler* was certain to be thumbed into nothingness, after enduring much from May showers, July suns, and fishy companionship. It is almost a wonder that any examples of Walton’s and Bunyan’s first editions have survived into our day. The little volume was meant to find a place in the bulging pockets of anglers, and was well adapted to that end. The work should be reprinted in a similar format: quarto editions are out of place.

The fortunes of the book, the *fata libelli*, have been traced by Mr. Westwood. There are several misprints (later corrected) in the earliest copies, as (p. 88) ‘Fordig’ for ‘Fordidg,’ (p. 152) ‘Pudoch’ for ‘Pudock.’ The appearance of the work was advertised in *The Perfect Diurnal* (May 9-16), and

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Walter was fond of trout-fishing, and in his *Quarterly* review of Davy’s *Salmonia*, describes his pleasure in wading Tweed, in ‘Tom Fool’s light’ at the end of a hot summer day. In salmon-fishing he was no expert, and said to Lockhart that he must have Tom Purdie to aid him in his review of *Salmonia*. The picturesqueness of salmon-spearing by torchlight seduced Scott from the legitimate sport.

in No. 154 of *The Mercurius Politicus* (May 19-26), also in an almanack for 1654. Izaak, or his publisher Marriott, cunningly brought out the book at a season when men expect the Mayfly. Just a month before, Oliver Cromwell had walked into the House of Commons, in a plain suit of black clothes, with grey stockings. His language, when he spoke, was reckoned unparliamentary (as it undeniably was), and he dissolved the Long Parliament. While Marriott was advertising Walton's work, Cromwell was making a Parliament of Saints, 'faithful, fearing God, and hating covetousness.' This is a good description of Izaak, but he was not selected. In the midst of revolutions came *The Compleat Angler* to the light, a possession for ever. Its original purchasers are not likely to have taken a hand in Royalist plots or saintly conventicles. They were peaceful men. A certain Cromwellian trooper, Richard Franck, was a better angler than Walton, and he has left to us the only contemporary and contemptuous criticism of his book: to this we shall return, but anglers, as a rule, unlike Franck, must have been for the king, and on Izaak's side in controversy.

Walton brought out a second edition in 1655. He rewrote the book, adding more than a third, suppressing *Viator*, and introducing *Venator*. New plates were added, and, after the manner of the time, commendatory verses. A third edition appeared in 1661, a fourth (published by Simon Gape, not by Marriott) came out in 1664, a fifth in 1668 (counting Gape's of 1664 as a new edition), and in 1676, the work, with treatises by Venables and Charles Cotton, was given to the world as *The Universal Angler*. Five editions in twelve years is not bad evidence of Walton's popularity. But times now altered. Walton is really an Elizabethan: he has the quaint freshness, the apparently artless music of language of the great age. He is a friend of 'country contents': no lover of the town, no keen student of urban ways and mundane men. A new taste, modelled on that of the wits of Louis XIV., had come in: we are in the period of Dryden, and approaching that of Pope.

There was no new edition of Walton till Moses Browne (by Johnson's desire) published him, with 'improvements,' in 1750. Then came Hawkins's edition in 1760. Johnson said of Hawkins, 'Why, ma'am, I believe him to be an honest man at the bottom; but, to be sure, he is penurious, and he is mean, and it must be owned he has a degree of brutality, and a tendency to savageness, that cannot easily be defended.'

This was hardly the editor for Izaak! However, Hawkins, probably by aid of Oldys the antiquary (as Mr. Marston shows), laid a good foundation for a biography of Walton. Errors he made, but Sir Harris Nicolas has corrected them. Johnson himself reckoned Walton's *Lives* as 'one of his most favourite books.' He preferred the life of Donne, and justly complained that Walton's story of Donne's vision of his absent wife had been left out of a modern edition. He explained Walton's friendship with persons of higher rank by his being 'a great panegyrist.'

The eighteenth century, we see, came back to Walton, as the nineteenth has done. He was precisely the author to suit Charles Lamb. He was reprinted again and again, and illustrated by Stoddart and others. Among his best editors are Major (1839), 'Ephemera' (1853), Nicolas (1836, 1860), and Mr. Marston (1888).

The only contemporary criticism known to me is that of Richard Franck, who had served with Cromwell in Scotland, and, not liking the aspect of changing times, returned to the north, and fished from the Esk to Strathnaver. In 1658 he wrote his *Northern Memoirs*, an itinerary of sport, heavily cumbered by dull reflections and pedantic style. Franck, however, was a practical angler, especially for salmon, a fish of which Walton knew nothing: he also appreciated the character of the great Montrose. He went to America, wrote a wild cosmogonic work, and *The Admirable and Indefatigable Adventures of the Nine Pious Pilgrims* (one pilgrim catches a trout!) (London, 1708). The *Northern Memoirs* of 1658 were not published till 1694. Sir Walter Scott edited a new issue, in 1821, and defended Izaak from the strictures of the salmon-fisher. Izaak, says Franck, 'lays the stress of his arguments upon other men's observations, wherewith he stuffs his indigested octavo; so brings himself under the angler's censure and the common calamity of a plagiarist, to be pitied (poor man) for his loss of time, in scribbling and transcribing other men's notions... I remember in Stafford, I urged

his own argument upon him, that pickerel weed of itself breeds pickerel (pike).’ Franck proposed a rational theory, ‘which my Compleat Angler no sooner deliberated, but dropped his argument, and leaves Gesner to defend it, so huffed away...’ ‘So note, the true character of an industrious angler more deservedly falls upon Merrill and Faulkner, or rather Izaak Ouldham, a man that fished salmon with but three hairs at hook, whose collections and experiments were lost with himself,’ – a matter much to be regretted. It will be observed, of course, that hair was then used, and gut is first mentioned for angling purposes by Mr. Pepys. Indeed, the flies which Scott was hunting for when he found the lost Ms. of the first part of *Waverley*

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