

The Bird with the Golden Cape

by Andrew Herd and Hermann Dietrich-Troeltsch



A cock golden pheasant. Photo by Richard Taylor.

FEW CREATURES CAN claim to have had more influence over the development of the salmon fly than the golden pheasant—aka *faisan doré*, *goldfasan*, *faisán dorado*, or *Chrysolophus pictus*, depending on where in the world or science you happen to hang your hat. This spectacular bird was first seen in England in John Spencer's collection in Windsor Park in about 1725. Eleazar Albin was invited to draw it for his three-volume hand-colored work, *A Natural History of Birds*, thereby producing the first known illustration of the species. At the time, the bird was so rare outside its natural range that even Spencer had no idea what to call it, and Albin ended up settling for the prosaic “red pheasant cock

from China.”¹ Another male golden pheasant was given to the Swedish Princess Louise Ulrika in the mid-1740s. This bird was kept on her estate near Stockholm until it died, whereupon it was presented to Carl Linnaeus, who classified it as *Phasianus pictus*.²

The native range of the golden pheasant is in central China, including southeast Qinghai and southern Gansu, as well as the territory east through southern Shaanxi to western Henan and western Hubei, and south through Sichuan and Guizhou to northern Guangxi. Its natural habitat is the thick undergrowth of mountains and valleys; appropriately enough, wherever bamboo grows, there is a chance of finding golden pheasants. The female is as dowdy as any hen pheasant can be, but the male is an absolute riot of rich reds, greens, blues, and browns, with a striking cape of black-striped golden feathers and a crest of deep gold feathers, which in some cases are tipped with

blood red. This eye-catching livery no doubt accounts for the cock's life-preserving habit of skulking in the darkest recesses of the undergrowth, where it divides its time between being remarkably territorial and flying badly.

The golden pheasant's only rival is the Lady Amherst's pheasant (*Chrysolophus amherstiae*), although we would put in a vote for the green pheasant (*Phasianus versicolor*), but whatever the merits of the other two species might be, 'twas the golden pheasant that caught salmon fly dressers' attention, and the first salmon pattern to use its feathers was noted in 1800.³ Although Samuel Taylor was the first to publish a pattern containing golden pheasant, it seems exceedingly unlikely that he was the first to use the material in a salmon fly. The man was no great innovator anyway, which raises the question of who did, and when, and whether he was Irish, or British, or what. We do not have anything approaching a pat

This article is an edited excerpt from Volume 1 of *Blacker*, Andrew Herd and Hermann Dietrich-Troeltsch's forthcoming trilogy about William Blacker, which will be published by the Medlar Press in spring 2016.



We think nothing of using golden pheasant feathers today, but at one time they were beyond reach because of price. Photo by Andrew Herd.

answer to this, but some general discussion might be in order.

The golden pheasant wasn't classified until 1758⁴ because it was astonishingly rare and eye-wateringly expensive in Britain before that date, which means that the chances of a fly dresser getting his hands on one without running the risk of having his fingers chopped off would have been somewhat limited. The bird was represented in several collections in the 1740s, but it remained a very unusual sight in the 1750s and 1760s.⁵ The species wasn't even bred in England until the early nineteenth century,⁶ which made individuals even more precious, this scarcity resulting in less than a dozen patterns using the material being published before 1842.⁷ However, we are sure that the potential of the golden pheasant was appreciated the very first time an angler laid eyes on one, but allowing a bit of time for breeding and imports to ramp up, it is reasonable to assume that fly dressers would have been lucky to get hold of usable amounts of material before about 1780; even then, those concerned would have counted themselves among a select few. If one takes this scenario into account, then it seems logical that the rarity of this fabled material and other species like it might actually have been the catalyst for the development of the new way of winging salmon flies that came into fashion at about this time called the mixed wing.

Before the mixed wing's appearance, the majority of salmon flies were winged with strips or bunches of a single material, very often turkey, mallard, teal, heron, or bittern, and occasionally pea-

than a few feather types to be mixed together in the wing. The most exotic material in use was parrot, unless you count Richard Franck's "paraketa" and "phlimingo,"⁸ which must have been almost as hard to find as golden pheasant.

Then, at some point in the late eighteenth century, fly dressers struck out in a completely new direction and began building salmon fly wings out of mixtures of fibers (known to scientists as barbs) taken from the feathers of half a dozen or more different species, laying three or four barbs of each type in groups to build up an attractive layered effect. We should stress that the ends of the fibers were left loose and that they were not married together, the result being an incredibly mobile and attractive wing. An oft-missed detail about this style of tying is that such early instructions as survive rarely state the need to make mixed wings out of paired feathers—in other words, early salmon flies of this type can be tied with a mix of right- and left-sided fibers in each wing. This might seem hard to credit, but based on a close examination of surviving early salmon patterns, this is the method that even William Blacker chose to follow. Needless to say, there were exceptions, the obvious examples being the case of a mixed wing built around a central pair of feathers, or where strips of feathers are used to bulk up a wing, but Blacker, for instance, very often dealt with the latter case by "turning" the strips on one side of the fly, the telltale sign being that the tips of the barbs of the turned strip point



Left to right: Jack the Giant Killer from Newland; the Shannon, a Blacker pattern; and the Parson from Newland, all tied by Alberto Calzolari. Photo by Andrew Herd.



*Blacker's Shannon No. 3, tied in the hand by Sebastián Letelier.
Photo by Andrew Herd.*

One of Blacker's variations on his Shannon fly No. 12 (1843 series), tied by Sebastián Letelier, without any substitution of materials and using hackles dyed to Blacker's specifications. Blacker's style was very different from the late-nineteenth-century norm: note the very long tail and the free fibers in the wing. Photo by Andrew Herd.



up instead of down. There is no question that Blacker used this method from time to time throughout his career, and if any readers doubt this, we would refer them to the image of the Ballyshannon, opposite page 145 of the 1855 edition of his book, which shows this feature very clearly indeed.⁹

Staying with Blacker, an even more interesting detail is that the left- and right-hand sides of his early (i.e., 1842-era) patterns sometimes show completely different combinations of materials. This appears to be the result of his having followed an even older method: to mix all of the fibers used to build the wings together before dividing them into two, which didn't always result in an even distribution of the individual barbs. Apart from

being the accepted style of the time, the rationale for using this method was almost certainly that the gaudy feathers used in mixed wings were disproportionately expensive in the 1840s compared with even twenty years later.

By contrast, married wings, sometimes referred to as built wings, which were developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, after Blacker's death, *must* be built with paired fibers and take advantage of tiny hooks, called barbules, which are found on the sides of every feather fiber. If barbules didn't exist, birds would be unable to fly, because the barbs in their feathers would flex independently instead of forming a single aerodynamic unit (known as a vane on a flight feather). Marrying a wing involves

zipping the barbules on each of the wing's component fibers together, fortune having decreed that this can be done even if the barbs come from completely different species. The reason for the mandatory use of paired, or handed, fibers in married wings is that if, say, the left-hand wing isn't built entirely from left-handed barbs, the barbs won't zip together neatly.

Married wings are much less mobile than mixed wings, and building wings this way completely alters the behavior of the fly, let alone its appearance. The motivation for using the method is the strong belief among the late Victorians that salmon flies should have the slimmest possible vertical cross section to make them behave predictably under

water. The married wing is the offspring of the mixed wing, but—largely because no one has ever really sat down and tried to disentangle the situation once and for all—married wings are very frequently referred to as mixed wings, which causes endless confusion. The married wing is the work of the late-nineteenth-century heretics, about whom readers should not concern themselves (in our opinion), other than to hope that their modern disciples will one day find the true path to mixed-wing righteousness.

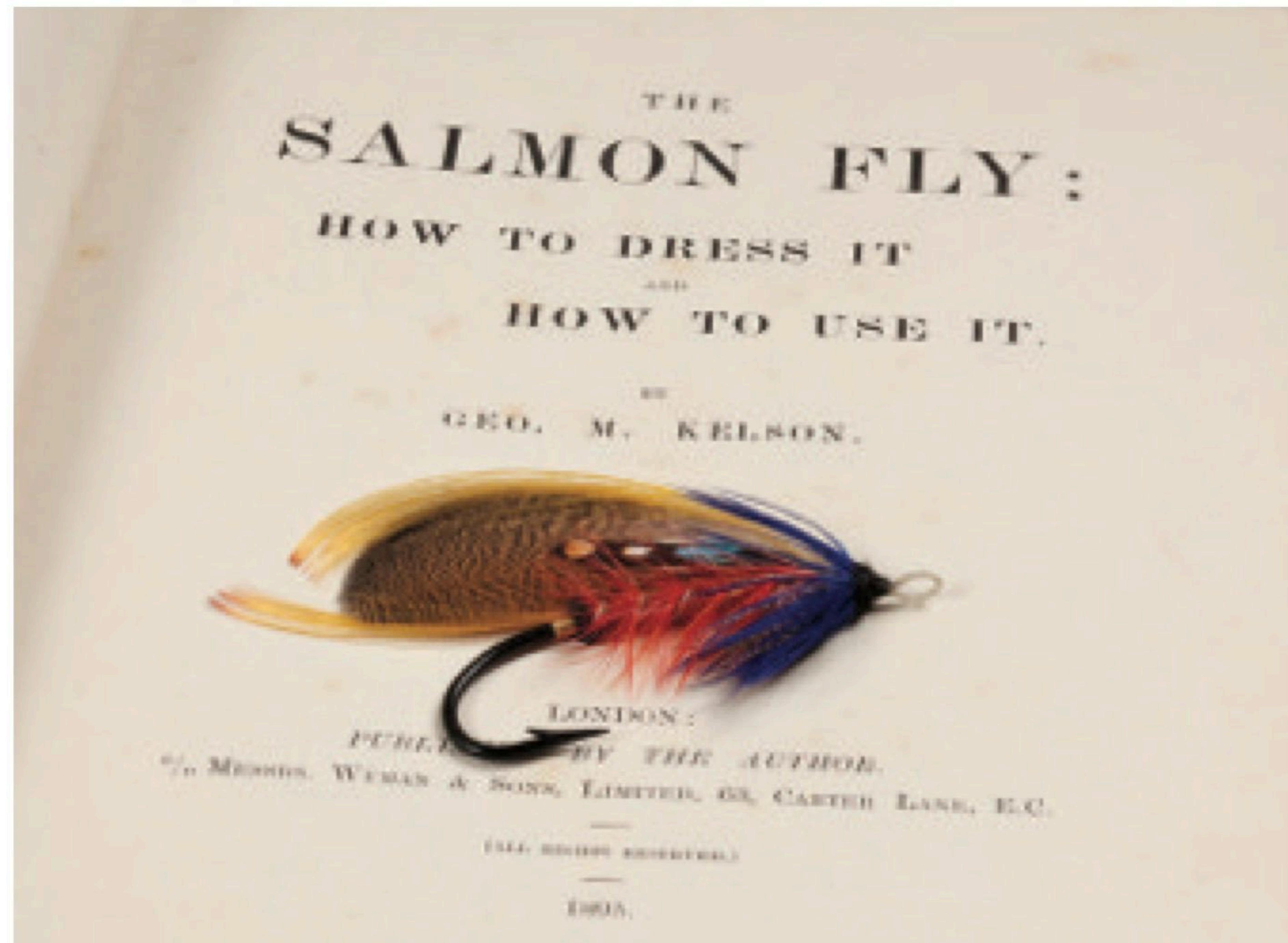
At the risk of appearing to make a further and even more dangerous diversion away from our subject, one point that is worth clearing up here is George Kelson's oft-repeated claim to have

invented the mixed wing. This particular imbroglio is complicated by the way Kelson gives an excellent definition of the difference between married and mixed wings on page 23 of *The Salmon Fly* before proceeding to ignore it completely on page 93, which is where he makes his unfounded claim.¹⁰

The mixed wing was in use forty years before Kelson was born. It came along at exactly the right moment for the Irish fly dressers who did so much to develop it, for the entirely understandable reason that the method provided the perfect framework for showcasing small quantities of very rare and expensive feathers without driving the price of the finished pattern completely out of sight. Built like

this, an early mixed wing might have as few as six or eight fibers of tippet in it, together with perhaps a single topping, the remainder of the barbs coming from more common species, allowing the dresser to make scores of flies from a single skin and a satisfyingly large number from a single feather. The method was extremely flexible, because it made it easy to modify a particular fly dressing to suit a range of pockets: if your customer was inclined to economize, less golden pheasant went into the wing; if he was a wealthy man, more. This rationale is one of the reasons why the early-nineteenth-century Irish fly dressers adopted such a laissez-faire attitude about the composition of mixed wings—they were used to

The Britannia, dressing as given by Kelson, who attributed it to John Bernard, although it is a Blacker pattern. Tied by Alberto Calzolari. Photo by Andrew Herd.



A later pattern showing the use of golden pheasant, this is Major John Traherne's *Fra Diavolo*, which has a married wing element built in. Tied by Alberto Calzolari. Photo by Andrew Herd.

making them up as they went along, based on the materials they had available and an estimate of their customer's ability to pay. But the most important point is that the technique was well developed by the early nineteenth century and is therefore most definitely not the intellectual property of George Kelson.

You will doubtless have noticed that we have skated very carefully around the dates here. This is because we are talking about Ireland, a land where the majority of early fly tiers were illiterate and where the British exercised complete control of printing, a situation that leaves us woefully short of written evidence. The one ray of light we have here lies in the Harris collection, held at the American Museum of Fly Fishing, which contains some of

the oldest flies known to exist. Thanks to historian Ken Cameron and museum Deputy Director Yoshi Akiyama, we can confirm that golden pheasant cape was in use in Ireland by 1791, because the Harris collection includes a salmon fly known by the rather unromantic identifier 1991.020.015, and this has a mixed wing built around paired tippet feathers. As far as we are aware, this is the oldest existing fly that includes golden pheasant, but even with the very early date of this collection, 1991.020.015 is unique among its fellows for its use of the material; apart from a scattering of macaw, the most exotic feather used among the remainder of the patterns is peacock. One wonders where the dresser of this pattern found his materials, because the last thing any-

one who owned a golden pheasant would have done would have been to let his pet out of the aviary for fear of all the fly dressers camped out in the shrubbery. Of course, Galway, Limerick, and the Shannon ports would all have seen live birds pass through their docks, but those would have been well beyond the pocket of all but the wealthiest individuals, given that the cost of golden pheasant feathers was astronomical in the 1790s. We know that there were quite a few deaths on the long sea journeys involved in importing the species, and it is more than probable that the skins of these birds would have been preserved, but even then, fly dressers would have been up against the milliners, and the competition would have been fierce.

Sara Wilcox



1991.020.15 from the Harris collection at the American Museum of Fly Fishing. As far as we are aware, this is the oldest existing fly that includes golden pheasant.



The Parson from Henry Garrett Newland's *The Erne, Its Legends and Its Fly-Fishing*, tied by Alberto Calzolari. Photo by Andrew Herd.

Another possibility, though, is that the sort of man who could afford exotica such as golden pheasants would have been quite likely to have been a salmon fisherman, and it doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to conjure up what such an individual might have done with the feathers had one of his prize birds expired. This situation was beginning to ease up a little by beginning of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, with a breeder in Bath, for example, offering twenty-five brace of two- and three-year-old birds in full plumage at three guineas a pair,¹¹ which in 1838 money was at least twice the weekly pay of a London artisan.¹² By that time, a great deal of experimentation was beginning to occur, and a few wealthy men were lucky to get their hands on flies like the Parson shown here, which has been tied according to the directions given in Henry Garrett Newland's book on the Erne—and yes, they really did put the toppings on upside down, this being back in the day when salmon flies were fun.¹³

The moral of this long detour into the history of ornamental garden birds is that golden pheasant topping and tippet feather were in such shockingly short supply in the early nineteenth century that very few patterns used either. Early experiments with the use of golden

pheasant seem to have taken place in both Britain and Ireland, with dressers in the Irish west and southwest the prime movers, but tippet and topping were very rare items before 1840, and that is one of the many reasons why Blacker made such a splash. Everybody in the London trade must have been aware of the sensational potential of golden pheasant, but laying your hands on a useful quantity of its feathers was another thing entirely; yet all of a sudden, here was a man who not only was sitting on a stockpile of this secret weapon, but was selling patterns that flaunted it to anyone who was prepared to pay. We have a three-volume book in preparation about Blacker. Stay with us, because there is a lot more entertainment to be had before we are done.

4. J. del Hoyo, A. Elliott, and J. Sargatal (eds.), *Handbook of Birds of the World*, Vol. 2: *New World Vultures to Guineafowl* (Barcelona: Lynx Edicions, 1994), 543.

5. George Edwards, *A Natural History of Uncommon Birds*, Vol. 2 (London: 1743–1764), 68.

6. A. Brown, "One Hundred Years of Notable Avian Events in British Birds," *British Birds* (vol. 100, no. 4), 214–43. Brown gives the date of first breeding in the U.K. as 1870, but this is unlikely to be correct, as breeders were advertising birds long before this.

7. Andrew Herd, *The History of Fly Fishing*, Vol. 3: *Salmon Fly Patterns 1766–1914* (Shropshire, England: The Medlar Press, 2013).

8. Richard Franck, *Northern Memoirs, Calculated for the Meridian of Scotland: To Which Is Added, the Contemplative and Practical Angler* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1821), 303. Note that this is a reprint of the 1694 first edition.

9. William Blacker, *Blacker's Art of Fly Making* (London: William Blacker, 1855), facing page 145.

10. George Kelson, *The Salmon Fly* (London: George Kelson, 1895), 23, 93.

11. Advertisement, *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* (4 March 1838), 1.

12. Arthur Bowley, *Wages in the United Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century: Notes for the Use of Students of Social and Economic Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900), 23.

13. Henry Garrett Newland, *The Erne, Its Legends and Its Fly-Fishing* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1851), frontis.

ENDNOTES

1. Eleazar Albin, *A Natural History of Birds*, vol. 3 (London: printed for the author, 1731), 34–35.

2. Ingvar Svanberg, "Golden Pheasant (*Chrysolophus pictus*) in Sweden in the 1740s," *Der Zoologische Garten* (2007, vol. 77, no. 1), 24–28.

3. Samuel Taylor, *Angling in All Its Branches* (London: Longmans, 1800), 249.