

## **A Felicitous Day for Fish**

The University of Northampton, England, hosted the Brigid Brophy Anniversary Conference on October 9-10, 2015. The conference commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the death of Brigid Brophy (1929-1995) and the fiftieth anniversary of her article, 'The Rights of Animals,' published in the *Sunday Times* on October 10, 1965 (and later collected in the ground-breaking 1971 anthology, *Animals, Men and Morals*). The School of the Arts at the University of Northampton hosted the two-day conference to celebrate all aspects of Brophy's literary career, as well as her leading contribution to animal rights, vegetarianism, anti-vivisectionism, humanism, feminism, and her advocacy of the Public Lending Right. The conference organiser was Professor Richard Canning. The following is the abstract and the paper I presented at the conference. The paper was called 'A Felicitous Day for Fish.'

### **Abstract**

In 1980, the RSPCA published the Report of the Panel of Enquiry into Shooting and Angling chaired by the distinguished zoologist, Lord Medway, which concluded that "vertebrate animals (i.e., mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish) should be regarded as equally capable of suffering to some degree or another, without distinction between 'warm-blooded' and 'cold blooded' members." (para 286)

The RSPCA was in turmoil during the 1970s and 1980s. Its policy on hunting symbolised the conflict between members who understood the society as only caring for cats and dogs and progressive members, inspired in part by Brigid Brophy's 1965 article 'The Rights of Animals,' who opposed bloodsports and other forms of animal exploitation.

The RSPCA subsequently adopted progressive policies, including opposition to bloodsports (but not angling), and banned hunters as ineligible for membership. These developments sent shockwaves through the British establishment, which continue to rumble to the present. The 2015 Conservative Party manifesto commits the government to 'protect hunting, shooting and fishing' and 'give Parliament the opportunity to repeal the Hunting Act on a free vote, with a government bill in government time.'

Polls repeatedly show majority public opinion opposed to hunting whereas angling is one of the country's most popular past times, and is not an issue of concern for animal welfare organisations.

The launch of the Council for the Prevention of Cruelty by Angling in London and its demise four years later may only warrant a footnote in the history of the animal welfare movement except that Brigid Brophy gave its inaugural address in 1981. As CPCA's Patron, she called this a 'felicitous day for fish' and as CPCA's Vice President I recall her speech with admiration for its courage, vision, and wit.

Drawing from the CPCA file in my animal rights archive, my presentation will consider the context of the remarks made by Brophy about animal rights, including how she saw cruelty to fish in angling from the perspective of her ‘fellow Lefties’ demands for social justice’ and the ‘Right Wing’s concerns for the freedom of the individual.’

### **A Felicitous Day for Fish**

I was a student in 1973 and worked the summer in a chicken slaughterhouse. Three years later, I was a vegan campaigning at Compassion In World Farming to end factory farming. I was an evangelising vegan — a *vegical* — who was in a hurry to change the world. Today, I am still a *vegical* and my life is still dedicated to changing the world. But four decades of campaigning full-time for animal rights demands a price. I now view the world through the prism of cynicism and melancholy, which is why you can follow me on Twitter as the Grumpy Vegan.

In 1977, Compassion’s co-founder, Peter Roberts, took me to the RSPCA’s Rights of Animals symposium at Trinity College, Cambridge. This is when I first saw Brigid Brophy. Every speaker I heard at the symposium was for the first time. I went on to work with some of them, in various capacities and on various projects, including the Labour Peer Lord Houghton of Sowerby; the campaigner Clive Hollands; the philosopher Tom Regan; the veterinarian Michael W. Fox; the author Jon Wynne-Tyson; the anti-bloodsports campaigner John Bryant; and the psychologist and campaigner Richard Ryder, whose contribution to animal advocacy is outstanding.

The RSPCA symposium was a two-day crash course in philosophy, applied ethics, religious values, campaign strategy, and political organising. I left Trinity College inspired with ideas and eager to learn more.

Foremost at the symposium was Lord Houghton’s exaltation to ‘Parliament we must go,’ which resonated with me as much then nearly 40 years ago as it still does today. ‘This is where laws are made,’ he said, ‘and where the penalties for disobedience and the measures for enforcement are laid down.’ His wise advice for the animal rights movement to go to Parliament and pass laws for animals is sadly still a challenge for some in the animal rights movement to understand. The single greatest challenge confronting animal rights is making the moral and legal status of animals a mainstream political issue, as animal rights is more than just a moral crusade and an optional personal lifestyle choice. This is something that I explore in my book, Growl, which is an animal rights memoir and manifesto.

But what of Brigid Brophy at the RSPCA symposium?

I recall her presence as something rare and unusual. There was the dry humour, the deadpan delivery, and the black nail varnish. Along with other speakers, Brigid Brophy spoke for me as my young self struggled to find ways to articulate in a meaningful way the

passion and compassion I felt about animal cruelty and exploitation. My nascent cynicism and melancholy resonated particularly with Brigid Brophy's mordant humour and unrelenting analysis. I became a fan immediately. I never spoke with her but I must have sat near her at meal times. We few vegans and vegetarians at the RSPCA symposium were relegated to separate tables away from the corpse-eating delegates in Trinity College's dining hall. We few vegans and vegetarians — Peter Roberts, Tom Regan and his wife, Nancy, and presumably Brigid Brophy but the memory is dim here — dined on meagre rations of bland 1970s-style veggie food. The rest of the symposium's attendees ate venison that was once flesh that belonged to deer who once grazed the lawns in the college grounds.

My presentation focusses on the impact that Brigid Brophy made in animal rights, with particular emphasis on when she was the inaugural speaker at a meeting of the Council for the Prevention of Cruelty by Angling on April 11, 1981 at Friends' Meeting Place on the Euston Road in central London. She was its national patron. I was its vice president. I draw from documents in my animal rights archive, including the text of her presentation. I am also most appreciative of Kate Levey, who made possible for me to have photographic access to Brigid Brophy's original manuscript for a speech, 'Is there a need for animal welfare legislation?', she made at the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare symposium, 'Animals and the Law,' in 1974.

First, I should say something about what it was like at the time of the RSPCA symposium and when the contemporary animal rights movement was forming. In 1977, James Callaghan was the British Labour Prime Minister and 'Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols' was in the charts. Jimmy Carter was president of the U.S. and Apple Computer was first incorporated. And, two days before the RSPCA symposium, Elvis Presley died at his home, Graceland, in Memphis, Tennessee.

The Band of Mercy and its successor the Animal Liberation Front, along with the Hunt Saboteurs Association and another group called Animal Activists, laid the foundation to an emerging activist movement for animals in the 1960s and 1970s. Older organisations such as the National Anti-Vivisection Society and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection were led by sincere and dedicated people; however, as they aged so did the organisations under their leadership. The RSPCA Reform Group worked to modernise the society and free it from its domination from the 'shires' that included fox hunt supporters on the national council and in its membership. In the 1980s, I was elected on a progressive platform to the RSPCA's national council. But after I spoke out publicly against the society holding shares in companies that experiment on animals, I was expelled by the council's ruling conservative majority not only from the council but also the society. Apparently, I acted inimically to the Society's interests. This ignoble position of being an expelled member of the RSPCA I share along with red-coated wild animal killers. The struggle for the RSPCA and its ideology continues to play itself out today. Conservatives like nothing

better than to bear a grudge against the RSPCA, which successfully prosecuted the Heythorp Hunt in 2012 for breaking the law of the Hunting Act. The Heythorp Hunt is associated with David Cameron's parliamentary constituency of Witney. Tory MP Neil Parish, who chairs the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, is organising an investigation into the RSPCA to 'ensure the "right cases" are taken to court.'

Since the 1970s, opinion polls regularly showed the public overwhelmingly opposed to bloodsports. This was a time when increasing numbers of 'sabs' intervened between hunters and the wild animals they sought to kill. Also, the League Against Cruel Sports, under the leadership of Lord Houghton, became more politically sophisticated. Thus, the campaign against bloodsports increasingly attracted attention, and particularly when the League made donations to the Labour Party. For the first time, the Labour Party included in its manifesto in 1979 a commitment to legislate against hare coursing and stag hunting. Consequently, the League made two donations to the Labour Party. The first was for £50,000, which was for Labour's general election fund, and the second was for £30,000 and was restricted to publicising its commitment to animal welfare. These developments were the turning point in understanding the anti-bloodsports campaign not only as a moral crusade but also as a mainstream political issue, paving the way for the Hunting Act in 2004. Hunt opponents learnt a legal ban on hunting could only be achieved when a political party is elected to form a government with a manifesto commitment to introduce and pass anti-bloodsport legislation. The campaign to protect Britain's wildlife continues with the Conservative government's attempts to repeal the Hunting Act and neuter the RSPCA.

But what of fishing and angling? Are they not bloodsports?

Well, yes, they are; but there were reasons why neither the RSPCA nor the League would address fishing and angling as part of their anti-bloodsports campaign. Most people ate fish. Many people believe fish do not feel pain. Or, if they do, their pain is unimportant when human preferences dominate. Fishing and angling are popular pastimes, and particularly one viewed as a hobby for the working class, which meant that no Labour government would ever address. By the way, fishing is the general way to describe any method to catch fish and angling is generally a method of fishing that uses a hook attached to a fishing line and rod.

As part of my research for this presentation, I searched angling and fishing on the League's and RSPCA's websites. The League states in its FAQs that it does not have a policy on angling. 'As a charity with limited resources,' it states, 'we direct our resources where we feel we can be most effective.' Angling and fishing are on the RSPCA website in the context of how discarded fishing litter (hooks and lines) causes harm to wildlife and birds. Further, in section 5.11 of its animal welfare policy document, the RSPCA states that it 'believes current practices in angling involve the infliction of pain and suffering on fish.'

In 1980, the RSPCA published the Report of the Panel of Enquiry into Shooting and Angling chaired by the distinguished zoologist, Lord Medway, the Fifth Earl of Cranbrook, which concluded that ‘vertebrate animals (i.e., mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish) should be regarded as equally capable of suffering to some degree or another, without distinction between “warm-blooded” and “cold blooded” members.’ (para 286) The RSPCA animal welfare policy document refers to the Medway Report as proving to its satisfaction that fish are capable of experiencing pain and suffering. Nonetheless, neither the League nor the RSPCA campaign on fishing and angling as part of its anti-bloodsports strategy from the 1970s to the present.

This is why the Council for the Prevention of Cruelty by Angling was founded in London in 1981 and why Brigid Brophy’s inaugural address is interesting and important. Most people then, as they do now, do not care much about fish other than how to cook them. Fishing and angling are hugely popular hobbies. And, any effort to highlight the plight of fish by such leading anti-bloodsports as the RSPCA or the League Against Cruel Sports would be used by pro-bloodsports proponents in the public arena and political debate to make the thin end of the wedge argument: Ban hunting now and fishing will be next.

How did Brigid Brophy respond to these issues in her speech, ‘A Felicitous Day for Fish,’ at the inaugural CPCA meeting?

From the outset, she sought to frame the issue of fishing and angling as a ‘fascist fantasy.’ *Today a small group of human beings is setting itself formally and actively to dispel a specific corner of a fantasy to which our species is prone and which distorts our vision of the real world — the feudal, indeed the fascist, fantasy whereby we stamp around as the lords and bullies of everything and pretend that our most minor pleasures are so important in the scheme of things that they outweigh the entire life and outweigh the death agony of our fellow individual animals.*

She goes on to say that this inaugural meeting means that fishing rights and, she also included, shooting rights, will be seen as ‘ludicrously and tragically out of touch with reality as the idea nowadays seems to us that a person could own and buy and sell another person as a slave.’

But, she warns, ‘angling poses as a sport,’ which ‘disgracefully manages to get its hands on a certain amount of subsidy from public funds.’ She further warns that as sport is ‘one of the established religions of this country,’ angling becomes ‘respectable.’

*We shall be told that angling is the most popular participatory sport. We must point out that the participation of the fish is involuntary.*

‘O, go on, be a sport’ and ‘O, don’t be a spoil-sport,’ she advises, will be used against CPCA and its supporters. But she reminds us that it is the ‘angler who is the spoiler.’ ‘He despoils the fish of its health, happiness and life — of which it has only one; whereas if we

succeed in spoiling the angler's sport, he has hundreds of alternative, non-injurious sports open to him.'

Then, there's the 'other established religion of this country, namely Royalty.' Some of whom are 'frenzied in their passion for taking their fellow beings' lives.'

*The British are given to confusing the Royal Family with the Holy Family, especially at Christmas time on television. No doubt some simple minded people will accuse us of blasphemy as well as lese-majeste [to offend the dignity of a reigning sovereign or against a state] when we remark that a trout does not feel deeply privileged to suffer torment and death at the hands of the Prince of Wales.*

Drawing together her thoughts about hostile reactions to the anti-angling message in the first section of her speech, Brigid Brophy concludes by making a statement that summarises well the fundamental opposition to all calls for ending animal cruelty and exploitation.

*In fact, angling is an activity, an atrocity, that depends on the most monstrous of all class barriers, the class barrier our species has fantasised between us, on the one side, and on the other all the other animal species on the face of the earth, all of whom are, remotely or closely, our kin; and we pretend that this class barrier gives us absolute rights, rights of an absoluteness never claimed by the most arrogant feudal lord or the most grinding capitalist boss, while the rights of all the other animals are absolutely forfeit.*

But, as she says, 'I am myself a Lefty, but I am in a sense an impartial Lefty.'

*I do not feel very deep respect for my fellow Lefties' demands for social justice so long as they effectively ignore the colossal injustice of the class barrier we have put up between us and our fellow animals of other species. And equally and impartially, I do not feel much respect for the Right Wing's concern for the freedom of the individual so long as it is not prepared to defend the freedom of an individual fish to pursue his fishy life without wanton and bloody interference from humans.*

We must expect, she says, 'facetiousness and dismissive put-downs from Left, Right and, no doubt, Centre.' 'We shall be called extremists,' she goes on to say, 'by, I presume, people who are in favour of maiming and killing moderately.' We shall be treated as 'eccentrics.' But she consoled us with knowing that 'People with the right idea always are until it becomes the general idea.'

And with typical dry wit, Brigid Brophy concluded this section of her talk by saying, *Indeed, there is only one stock reproach I can think of that probably won't be brought against us, and that is the one that says that people who care about the welfare of animals care only about the animals that are cuddly. Whatever our opponents may say about fish, I don't think they can call them cuddly.*

So, why fish?, she asks.

She refutes the oft-put riposte of ‘Don’t you think that factory farming or bull-fighting is just as bad as, or even worse than, angling?’ by saying

*The question is not designed to be answered. It is designed to provoke an interesting and cosy intellectual discussion, in the course of which the questioner can stifle the promptings he feels from his own conscience towards doing something about any of the atrocities he names; and it is designed to divide the now quite large and certainly growing pro animals-in-general movement.*

Brigid Brophy goes on to make a key point about strategy for the — as she calls it — growing pro animals-in-general movement.

*We need, the animals need, all the organisations that champion animals of any kind. In real life, there is no either/or. A man can, as indeed my father did, give up angling because he has come to realise that it is immoral without being obliged by some law of nature to become a factory farmer or a toreador the next day. And conversely, we can join the CPCA without forgoing our freedom to insist on free range eggs or to be, as I am and I expect many of us are, vegetarian.*

So, Brigid Brophy warned that those of us who stand up for fish will be accused of being spoil-sports, eccentrics, not caring about more important others, and worse not only by those who kill fish for fun but also those who profit from fishing.

*And we shall be attacked also, probably more viciously, by the groups that are parasites on the popularity of angling: the makers and sellers of the instruments of torture and execution; the people who run artificial lakes and stock them with fish to serve as sitting targets for anglers; the publishers of angling magazines and books — who would have to work so much harder are they to try to sell a real book, an actual work of literature, to everyone who likes to spend a day sitting on a folding chair at the waterside; and the television programmers, to whom angling presents an opportunity to fill up air time without having to pay actors at Equity rates or screenwriters at Writers’ Guild rates.*

Rational and defiant in her views, Brigid Brophy called upon those present at the meeting in her conclusion to know that

*The opposition will probably hurt us, a bit at least, and, more dangerously I am sure it will from time to time tempt us to despair by making us think that our efforts are achieving nothing. Yet on we must, and on I do not doubt we shall go — until we or our children achieve a civilised country for humans and fish to live in on terms of reciprocal non-aggression, a country in which the only form of angling that is legal, and the only form anyone will want to participate in, is that highly skilled and vehemently competitive form where the line ends in a magnet and the fish consists of a metal attachment on a cardboard cut-out.*

In the June 1981 issue of ‘Hookup,’ the CPCA’s newsletter, Brigid Brophy’s speech was reported as holding

*held her audience spellbound [as] she put the case against angling. But it was done in her own inimitable style, with wit, imagination, intellectual brilliance that had her hearers laughing and sniffing in turn. It tugged at the heartstrings; it was in fact vintage Brophy — a speech to be savoured and returned to again and again.*

Earlier I said CPCA’s inaugural meeting with Brigid Brophy was interesting and important. This is because she

- Unequivocally opposed fishing and angling situating them alongside slavery as examples of a ‘fascist fantasy’
- Placed fishing and angling into an historical context in that in years to come we will look back on them — as we now do slavery — with disbelief and embarrassment
- Explained how fishing and angling were given legitimacy as a sport, including with royal patronage
- Rejected, as an ‘impartial Lefty,’ left wing demands for social justice and right wing concerns for individual freedom all the while they exclude fish from the political arena
- Stressed that those who make a profit from fishing and angling will be among their most strident supporters, which reminds me of Brigid Brophy’s celebrated quotation, *Whenever people say, ‘We mustn’t be sentimental,’ you can take it that they are about to do something cruel. And if they add, ‘We must be realistic,’ they mean they are going to make money from it.*
- And, finally, Brigid Brophy said to oppose fishing and angling does not require opposition to all other forms of animal exploitation although, as a vegan, she intimated that it was preferable

Two questions remain before I finish. First, what happened to the CPCA? And did Brigid Brophy’s inaugural address in 1981 make a difference?

CPCA continued to campaign until 1985, when at its AGM it dissolved and reformed as the Campaign for the Abolition of Angling with similar objectives. I resigned as CPCA’s vice president in July 1981, as I needed to focus on my work as the campaigns organiser at the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection. This was a more than full-time position and I had to prioritise my animal rights advocacy. The Campaign for the Abolition of Angling launched an annual National Anti-Angling Week and released a campaign video called ‘Angling — the Neglected Bloodsport.’ In 2003, CAA stopped campaigning although some local groups continued. It was later revived as the Fish Protection League and in 2012 merged with The Black Fish, a European-based conservation organisation whose mission is to ‘change attitudes towards our precious oceans and work to protect the unique life within them.’ There are other pro-fish organisations in addition to The Black Fish, including those who campaign against marine mammal displays. The anti-Sea World campaign waged by a



number of organisations is a notable example. Generally, there is, I believe, more public awareness about fish and their sentience, which is partly due by an increasing number of scientists whose research shows this, but the estimated global number of fish captured, killed, and used for various human activities is staggering. The U.S.-based advocacy organisation, Fish Feel, estimates that worldwide

*one to three trillion wild-caught fishes and 37 – 120 billion farmed fishes are killed commercially for food each year. Hundreds of millions more are killed for ‘sport’ each year in the U.S. alone. Fishes are also increasingly replacing other animals for scientific experimentation. Approximately one-quarter of all the animals used for research and education in North America are fish. Additionally, some 1.5 billion are used for aquariums.*

Never have Brigid Brophy’s words been more appropriate than when she says fishing and angling is a fascist fantasy. Actually, it is not a fantasy. It is a reality, a fascist reality.

Nonetheless, April 11, 1981 was a felicitous day for fish and a key date in the long animal liberation calendar. For as Brigid Brophy said on CPCA’s inauguration

*This is a felicitous day for fish. It is also, by a happy side effect, a felicitous day for birds, so many of whom are mutilated or poisoned by the lethal litter that anglers often leave behind them as though they were not content with the harm they do deliberately and knowingly. And as a matter of fact it is also a felicitous day for humans.*

Thank you.

### **Biography**

Kim Stallwood is an independent scholar and consultant. His book, Growl: Life Lessons, Hard Truths, and Bold Strategies from an Animal Advocate, was published by Lantern Books (2014). Since 1974, he has demonstrated personal commitment and professional experience in leadership positions with some of the world’s foremost animal advocacy organisations in the UK and USA, including CIWF, BUAV, PETA, and *The Animals’ Agenda* magazine. He co-founded the Animals and Society Institute in 2005 and is (volunteer) Executive Director of Minding Animals International. He became a vegetarian in 1974 after working in a chicken slaughterhouse and a vegan since 1976.

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