

## *Is Esox lucius our Last Mohican?*

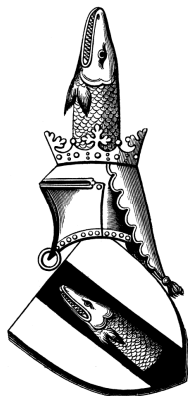
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Earthquakes are rare in Britain, the last of any real size stirring Essex to the roots in 1884. Dartmoor is the solidified remnant of a great eruption, and Edinburgh is built on another, but we have no active volcano, like a slumbering and occasionally snorting dragon, to remind us that beneath the rolling and tranquil crust of our land there remains a molten antiquity. Our physical atmosphere, like our politics, is pervaded with a soft and milky light, blurring the edge between night and day. We lack the contrasts of the tropics, where darkness comes upon the earth with Manichean severity and speed. Even its best friends must concede that Britain's natural world is less raw than *rechauffée*.

It is true, of course, that Eagles still cling to existence in one or two corners of Scotland, and the sparrow-hawk lurks about the suburban bird table, but wolves and bears are long gone, and the largest remaining feral mammals, ourselves aside, are ornamental monarchs with herbivorous habits and velvet covered antlers. One of our snakes is moderately poisonous, but the gently decorated adder makes up for toxicity with extreme timidity. Rats, the very fleas of human society and its image, are so much our creatures, like rebellious pets, that they do little or nothing to remove the impression that in these islands the red claw and redder tooth of primeval chaos were long ago drawn in the interests of health and safety.

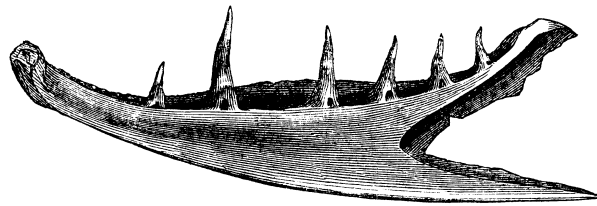
Yet, something remains of that earlier world, near at hand and unsubdued. Almost every river and lake shelters the pike, a predatory fish whose long body, cool eye and clenched, expressionless underslung jaw, have remained unchanged for all of human history and many thousands of years beyond that. This freshwater Coelocanth swims freely beneath the lazy punts of Cambridge and under the bridges of the Thames. It hangs obscurely in the black, brick-walled, canals of our major, once industrial, cities, and also in the noble rivers of North, South, East and West. And the very greatest giantesses of the species, Grendel's aunts, not only haunt the rock-strewn and abysmal lochs of Scotland, but make up their holts in the muddy sunken cars of our municipal reservoirs. If the pike had armorial bearings, and the *luce* is itself a significant feature in the heraldry of others, its motto would be *Ubique*.



The armorial ensigns of the Gascoignes: “Argent, on a pale sable a demi-luce or; crest, out of a ducal coronet, a demi-luce or” Thomas Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, Chapter II, “The Pike, or Luce”, (John van Voorst: London, 1852), pp. 49–65.

We should be glad of this invigorating presence. Those rare waters known to be free of this fish are tepid and comatose. You may stare into a pikeless river's turbid depths in hope of revelation, or seek an epiphany in its translucent volumes, yet find nothing but pretty fish and weeds. Only when there are pike, even though unseen, does the place stir with feeling. Being themselves free of emotion, perhaps, they are, like a great actor or the subtlest of raconteurs, the cause of strong reactions in others.

However, the suggestiveness of the pike is not always subtle. Like the big cats and the grander avian raptors, this great fish has acolytes in the world of men, parasites who indulge wistfully in sympathetic magic while gloating over and advertising the species' ice-white cave of eery, semi-translucent and phantasmagoric teeth.



H. Cholmondeley-Pennell (1837-1915), *The Angler-Naturalist: A Popular History of British Fresh-water Fish* (George Routledge and Sons: London, 1863), 203–206.

Myself, I shed tears over a bird's broken wing, and struggle to rescue wrens from cats, and the diet of the pike provokes in me no gloomy celebration. If you were to insist that Mother Nature is a wicked old witch beyond salvation to have plotted such a creature, so to batten off the roach and keep the numbers of ducklings down, I shouldn't argue long. But, holding a long, lean, pale-gold pike from the waters of Parham's Moat Hall, the descendants of Tudor river fish stocked to keep the Suffolk pleasure palace waters clean, a man may think of things that do not come from jostling in the street. And it was not just grand guignol that moved Arthur Beavan to record during his 1905 visit to another water-girt Suffolk house, Helmingham Hall, that he was amazed to see a door open in the wall and the cook stand forward to slop a bucket of bloody scraps to a waiting pike. Had it been a carp, that most tremulously cervine of fishes, no notice would have been taken.

But the pike is an authentic troll, a sinister and scarcely welcome genius loci, whose intrusion into the waterside scene catalyses a sudden and crystalline order amongst the blooming and buzzing confusion. A serpent in paradise, however, it is not, and though the pike gives form to our perception of pond and stream, the moral dimension remains simply absent.

The engine of these striking effects is not appearance. Unlike birds and most mammals, all fish are fleet in looks even when small, and the pike is no exception. But in the pike this dynamic decorum comes without the corresponding grace that beautifies both salmon and trout. The body has suggestions of rectilinearity, particularly about the upper surfaces, and the wrist of the tail is meanly small in relation to the overall mass of the creature. The caudal, dorsal, and anal fins are cramped close together to form a large paddle that propels the pike with an acceleration so impressive that a team at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is currently trying to build a robotic replica, presumably as a model for the next generation of US Navy torpedoes. When striking from a standing start the pike undergoes a force roughly eight to twelve times that of gravity, and at top speed will be travelling at some 6m/s (13mph). In Blunden's poem the miller that opened the hatch was amazed at the whirl in the water; it is a wonder he did not see steam as well.

Athletic statistics may daunt, but they do not move, and the inspiring aura that surrounds the fish must have other causes. Of all the physiognomical candidates, the black and gold-fringed eye of the pike is perhaps the most promising, and the degree of binocular vision is certainly unusual for a fish.

To be fixed upon by such a gaze is a notable experience, though the focus is never more than fleeting. The pike to us may be fascinating, but for her we are nothing. What we see in the pike, or what the pike seems to make of the world about her, is just a backwater leading down to a larger current of reflection.

Some writers, and the literature is large, find in the pike's eye the calculating evil of cinematic horror, a malice which we perhaps value as a distraction from more genuine, present, and potent threats in everyday society. I have searched carefully for a consoling Lucifer deep in the eyes of many Lucii, but, always disappointed, no longer trust reports of this elusive demiurge, and now believe that the pike exerts its magnetic fascination by suggesting a compressed kernel of time unfolding. Looking at and through this cold and sordid fish, the Northern past reveals itself in all its beauty and indifference.

*John Constable*

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