

Caught! The Travels and Travails of John W. Kerr, Fisheries Overseer, 1812 -1888

Joel B. Kerr

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Caught! is the inspiring biography of a fisheries overseer who faced barriers to his conservationist efforts.

Caught! is Joel B. Kerr's illuminating biography of Canadian fisheries overseer John W. Kerr.

John W. Kerr was born in Ireland in 1812 and moved to Canada in 1846. He was appointed as a fisheries overseer in 1864, at a time when performing his duties involved real dangers. During his illustrious career, he worked to enforce fishing laws throughout Ontario, dealing with challenges including treacherous roads, blistering cold weather, limited health care, and the fallout of personal tragedies.

Kerr's story is narrated in broad terms. The book is informative in addressing the states of local and national politics during his years of service, ably peering into early fish-and-game conservation efforts, and into the history of sustainable commercial fishing. Kerr's efforts on both fronts are shown to have been relentless, pitting him against questionable politicians, an unreliable legal system, and rapacious business people. An account of a dismissed court case against a refinery finds Kerr pursuing the matter regardless, even receiving death threats for his efforts. Some such disputes recurred; Kerr is seen facing repeating challenges, like dealing with people who fished on Sunday, despite prohibitions against the activity, as well as dealing with other forms of illegal fishing. He even relied on spies to apprehend some culprits.

Extracts from Kerr's diaries help to provide an in-depth image of his personality and character. In addition to his dedicated work, Kerr is shown to have been a compassionate man who went out of his way to help others. His writing evinces courage and persistence, and is complemented by engaging authorial commentary about Kerr's actions. For example, the book reveals Kerr's zeal in complaining about coworkers to his superiors, and shows that he was forced to retract some personal comments after the fact. It also suggests that he was prone to gullibility in dealing with others.

The book's early portions are entirely biographical, covering, in chronological order, the stages of Kerr's career, his achievements, and the hurdles he faced. Its later portions focus on specific, significant themes and events, including industrial pollution; social attitudes toward Indigenous people and Americans; and general attitudes about conservation (which, in Kerr's time, were often lax). Such themes help to unify the work and broaden its appeal.

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EDITH WAIRIMU (January 26, 2021)

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