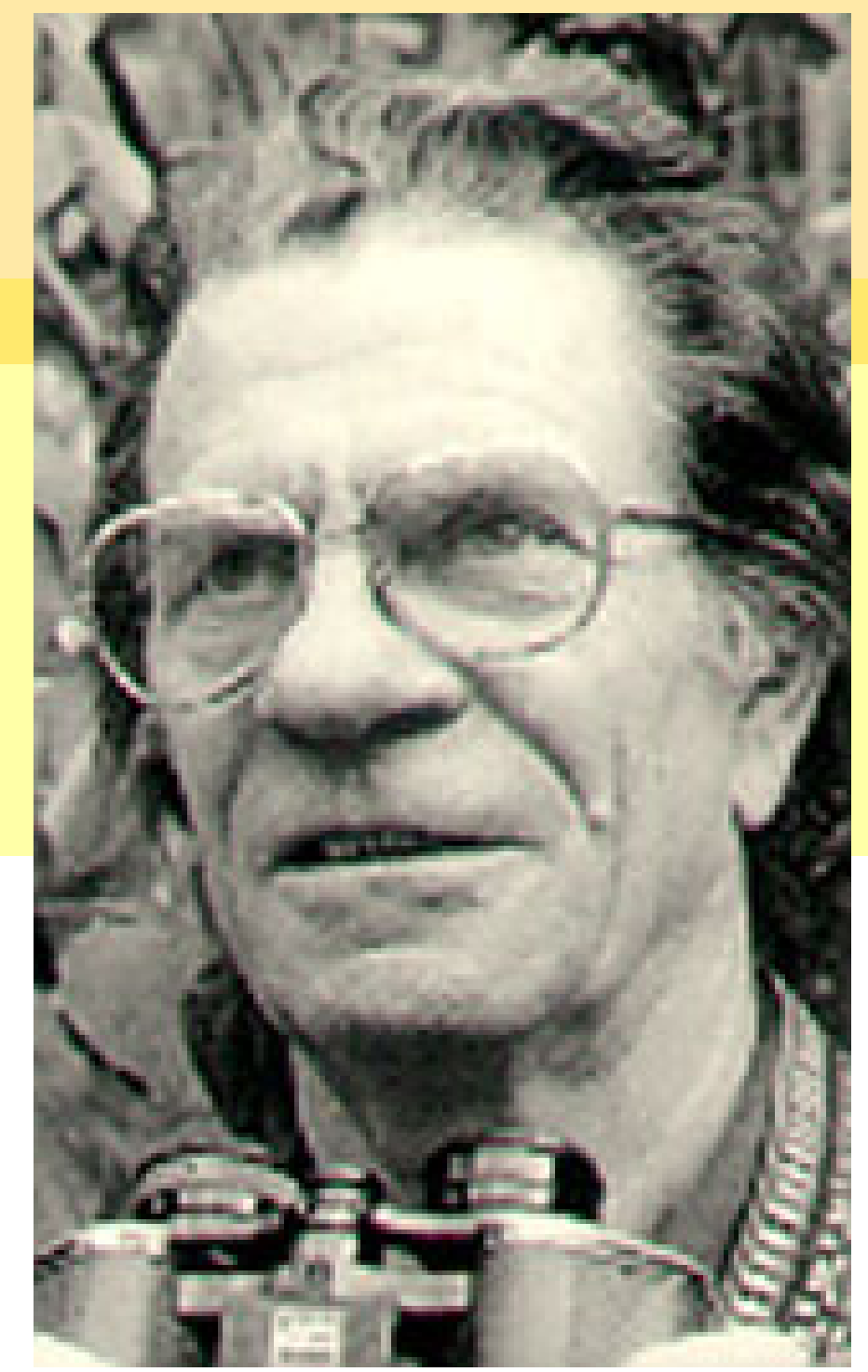


# Fred Bodsworth: Underappreciated Author and Critically Minded Conservationist



Bodsworth (photographed by Lois Mombourquette)

Picture from Bird Studies Canada

## Background

Fred Bodsworth was born October 11, 1918 in small-town southern Ontario. Despite the Depression crushing his chances of post-secondary education, Bodsworth became a journalist at the age of 22 and quickly moved up the ladder to posts at the *Toronto Daily Star* and *Maclean's*. Later he led ornithological tours and served as president of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. His articles were extremely diverse in content, but a distinct subset was closest to his heart: stories of the Canadian wilderness and its animal inhabitants. A foray into fiction produced *Last of the Curlews*, an emotional tale about a lone migrating male who finally meets a mate, only for their union to be destroyed by human violence. This novel launched Bodsworth's literary career in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, but we believe that his journalism is equally important to a true appreciation of his work.

Bodsworth is relatively unknown in the current literary world—undeservedly so. Though his novels occasionally surrender to the anthropomorphism of traditional animal stories (like we see in Ernest Thompson Seton and Charles G. D. Roberts), his work always centres on the explanation of natural life cycles and behaviours. His commitment to conservation and critical thinking about Canadians' perceptions of their environment make his writing surprisingly relevant even today, though natural sciences have progressed far since the 1950-60s.

## Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program

Supervisor:  
Professor Janice Fiamengo

By:  
Kate Henbest



Bodsworth banding a swallow in 1939.

Picture from the Ottawa Valley Naturalists

## Discussion

The product of this particular project will be a research paper on Bodsworth's eloquent and relevant portrayal of nature, but the ideas in this study can be taken in many future directions. Bodsworth's nature writing could be elevated in the academic and public spheres, reaching a wider and more appreciative audience. Journalism could gain greater respect as a literary field of artistic merit. By looking at the articles of an era, we gain an understanding of what issues mattered to our predecessors. Studies of this interdisciplinary nature could lead to an appreciation for the links between seemingly disparate fields, like literature and biology.

Bodsworth led ornithological tours all over the world and wrote numerous articles on amateur birding.



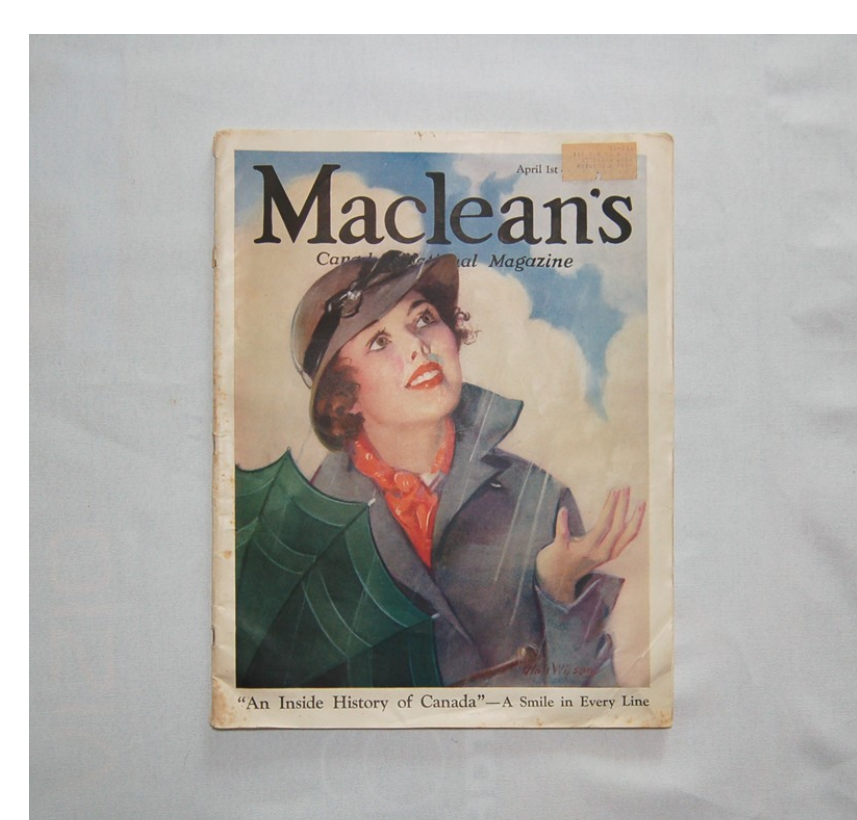
Picture from Bird Care and Rehabilitation

## Results

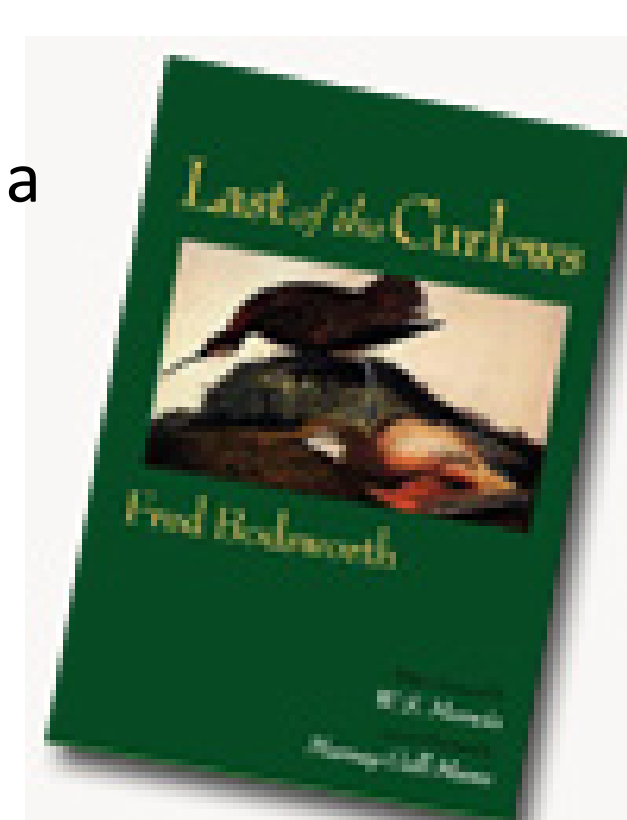
I designated 38 articles as highly relevant and 14 as possibly useful. The majority of nature articles were about birds (Bodsworth's personal passion) or fish (Canada's big draw for game tourism). Many articles were surprisingly relevant to today's environmental issues, focusing on habitat destruction, global warming, consumerism, forest management and pesticide use. Pieces on endangered animals were common, highlighting why the species was failing and why its preservation was important. Occasionally there were success stories—an animal that rebounded due to its own adaptability and man's scientific knowledge. Animals were not the sole focus; Bodsworth often discussed the need for parks and sustainable outdoor recreation. Though today's scientific knowledge shows up some factual errors of the time, his articles stay meaningful and informative to this day.

The Google search provided several short biographies, pictures, interviews and analytical essays on *Last of the Curlews*. Often birding societies or towns near his birthplace posted these items. Contact information was also obtained, giving us the potential for primary research. The literature search results (Scholar's Portal) were sparse. Two books gave somewhat detailed information on his life and works, but no journal articles focused on him, though many mentioned him as a prime example of Canadian nature writing. There is clearly room in the public and academic world for a closer look at Bodsworth's contribution to our Canadian literature and environmental conscience.

Distribution of Bodsworth's nature articles



Left:  
Cover of *Maclean's*, where Bodsworth worked for nearly a decade.



Right:  
Cover of *Last of the Curlews*, Bodsworth's most famous novel.

Pictures from Etsy.com

## Objective

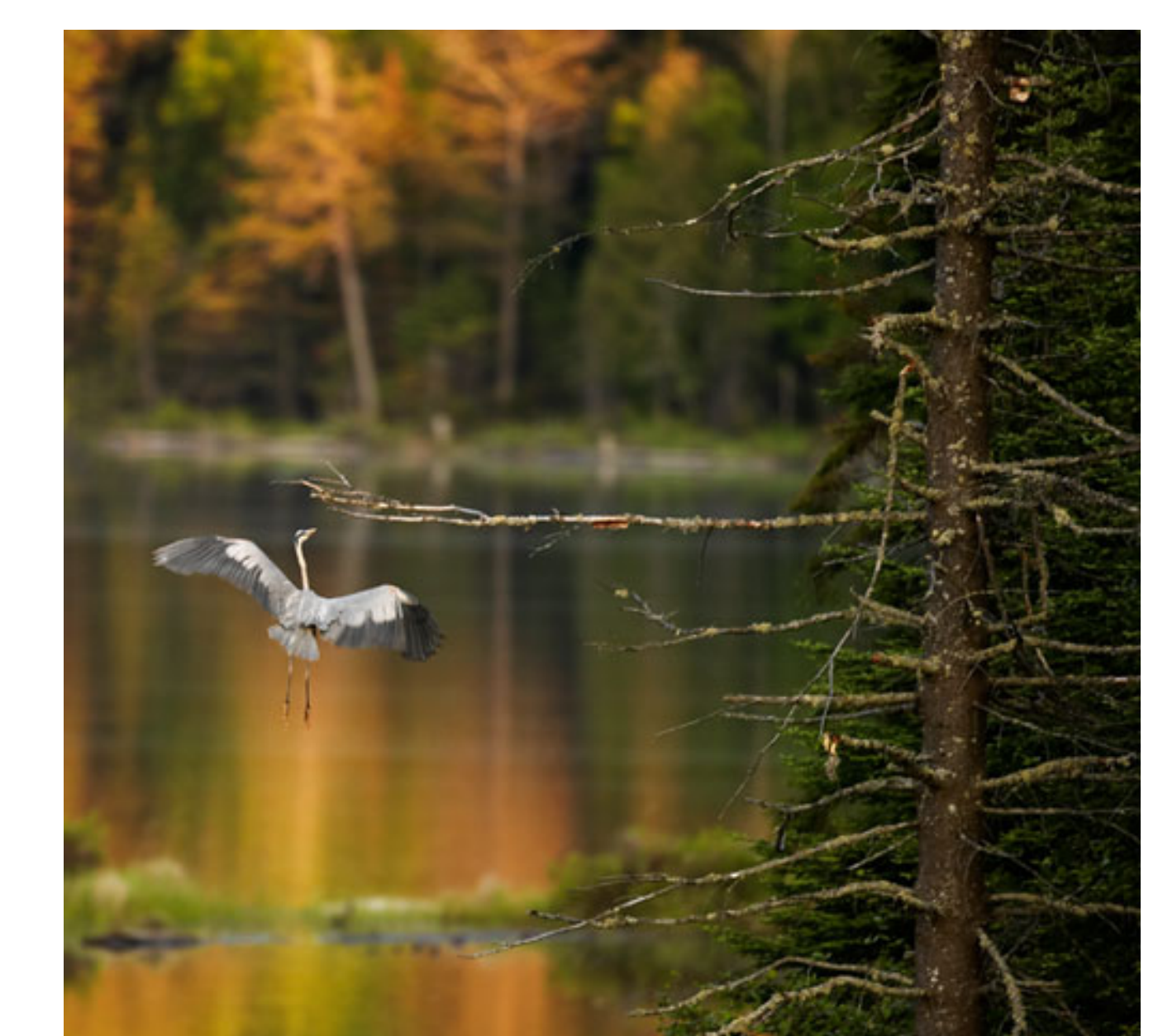
Our objective was to organize and analyse 106 *Maclean's* articles in order to gain a deeper understanding of Bodsworth's portrayal of the natural world and man's relationship with his environment.

## Tasks

I was responsible for the initial stages of this study. Based on my data collection, my supervisor will perform literary analysis and presentation of results.

My tasks included:

- prioritizing articles based on relevance to nature-writing
- organizing articles in chronological order within their categories
- reading articles and highlighting theses
- creating summary chart of most relevant articles
- performing an on-line search to determine public knowledge
- performing a literature search to determine academic interest



Algonquin Park, an example of the Canadian wilderness that Bodsworth wanted to conserve.

Picture from The Luminous Landscape