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30 Samhain, 2002
18 Nollag - maith
dhom an mhóil!

A Chora,

Rabham tuisochas leat as mo ghradam nua
spéiriúil a thraosluí lom.

Thaitin sé lom comhrá a bheith agam leat i
gleafadh Uí Choinn. Ní haon thréag é gur in Abhainn
an Shleamha ar an Chorraig a mharbhaigh mé mo chéad
bhrádaí. Tá an scéal annas agam san aiste deireannach de
'Interests (IPA, 1983) - corp iniata leis seo. B'fhéidir go ndearfaidh
sá seo do chúis fá choinne an Newsletter.

Fuair mé carta molta ó Theresa, baintreabhadh Shaoir
Uí Mhaoldhomhnaigh, Óstán Shliabh Liag (mór ar cheir muid fúinn san am)

Ath mór ort,

Ken Whicake

V Envoi

23 My First Salmon

Economists say profit is the reward of risk-taking: no less a reward of risk-taking is an interesting holiday. In my case the risk consisted in venturing beyond my experience. I had never fished for anything more exciting than brown trout and that only desultorily and without spectacular success. This time my target was the salmon, often described as 'lordly' in the books I consulted. I gazed with fascination at a photograph showing A. H. E. Wood of Glassel – the master of greased line fishing – with the thirteen salmon taken to his rod on part of one day on the Dee. Even one such fish in a fortnight would make me happy. So I got a friend's advice about rod and tackle and my first large mouthful of holiday atmosphere was the hour or more spent shopping hopefully. I had to stop spending sometime and felt I had been reasonably careful when I decided my old leather coat would do instead of a new fishing jacket and confirmed that there would be a discount on the total bill – a point I hoped would earn me credit at home.

The same feeling of economy sustained me, though less surely, in accepting a smaller collapsible net than seemed certain to hold the salmon of my ambition. But I had an uncomfortable moment when I displayed all my new equipment and my wife remarked that she could buy a dozen salmon for what it cost.

The end-of-season licence was taken out, the permit to fish on the local river paid for and we were off to Donegal. Then something happened that everyone but a psychologist would consider strange: I became suddenly reluctant to try out the new rod. Instead, I explained, I would like to make a reconnaissance – to see what the river was like, where the good pools were – and I took out my old trout rod and clambered over the

slippery rocks with the children. I even helped them unravel their lines and advised them on how and where to cast. Enough trout were caught within an hour to satisfy me that this humble sport was no longer interesting enough for me. I was justified in moving on to bigger game.

Not without some further reconnaissance, however. Having taken furtive stock of what others did and asked where were the best pools, I eventually got going with the new rod, finding it at first quite a tiring handful. My river, fortunately, was so tortuous that it was almost always possible to find somewhere one could stand and let the wind help to carry the line across stream. For some days hope was kept alive only by positive evidence that there were salmon in the river. I saw them jump now and then but they seemed to be wary creatures and I had begun to devote more attention to the beauties of the Donegal countryside – the long narrow hay fields, with the odd patch of oats or vegetables, in the valleys; the infinitude of greens on the slopes; the fuschia hedges and heather-crowned walls; the white or light-green cottages with thatched roofs snugly pegged down – when, unexpectedly, I took several fine brown trout and one white trout on the new rod one afternoon. Never before had I caught anything that could not be swung on to the bank without a second's delay. Now suddenly I had fish on the line that needed to be manoeuvred into a net. But how was I to perform this dexterity, balanced precariously on a rock in mid-stream? Fortunately, sixteen-year-old Raymond was at hand and with much fuss and excitement managed to bring the net over their heads.

For the first week, however, the salmon remained aloof. There wasn't enough water or else there was too much, according to the local experts. There was some rain almost every day and then it rained heavily a whole night through. The river was in spate the next morning and a host of fishermen appeared with spinners and worms. I waited until the following morning when the water was clearer and was tumbling less to try my Bloody Butcher in the run above Johnson's Pool. I hooked a larger and livelier sea-trout than I had ever handled and, being without a ghillie and still inexperienced with the net, I tried to beach him but he came off the hook at the last moment. When I had recovered my poise and called up Raymond to act as

ghillie, I tried again with the same fly and shortly was into a salmon. I knew by the whine of the reel as the line was torn out in his first frightened rush that it was a 'fish'. The curve of dark blue as he jumped confirmed it.

Now I had to remember in a flash everything I had read – dip the rod as he jumps, keep a sideways pressure on him, let him tire himself out. I thought if I pulled him gently downstream that (according to the books) he would forge upstream and encounter the pull of current and line. But this was a cleverer fish. He decided to make a dash downstream through a curving stretch of rocks and brown foaming water. I followed hard in his wake, trying to keep within feel of him. Clambering up the bank of the pool I could still feel him on the line and, having allowed him another couple of runs and jumps, I began to think of leading him in to the net. At his first sight of Raymond crouched over the bank he panicked and I had to reel him in again slowly. Just as Raymond swooped at him, a second time, he did a quick roll and the line went suddenly loose. Only when I raised the rod and saw the fly whirling in the air did I realise I had lost him. I heard myself ask 'what did I do wrong?' and then I became cold, sad and tired all at once. Is there any other sport in which failure can be so poignantly disappointing? In golf, for instance, you have a chance of recovering with your next shot. But a salmon lost is gone forever.

All the resources of reason and psychology were needed to preserve even a semblance of equanimity. It was only as we were taking down the rod later than Raymond (bless him) noticed that the hook was broken off at the barb and advanced the consoling theory that this had happened as I tried to beach the white trout, so that I was holding the salmon only by a curved pin. I made a mental note to use a proper salmon fly the next time and also to be less impatient about the business of hauling in.

But would there ever be a next time? Only a few days of the holidays were left and failure seemed more probable than success. Raymond reminded me that luck is on the side of the confident and we set off the next morning saying we would have a salmon before midday. In flagrant disregard of the theory that lightning never strikes twice in the same place we



went back to the same run, a little higher up. Within a quarter of an hour I had hooked a salmon, or rather a salmon had hooked himself, and it was a No 8 salmon fly this time and I was determined to play it cool. After a couple of jumps and zig-zag runs the fish decided to dig himself in, so firmly that I could not budge him and began to fear I was caught in a rock. I had to pull dangerously hard to get him moving. We timed ourselves as an insurance against impatience. Only at the end of twenty minutes of play did I draw him into the shore, where Raymond netted him skilfully and ran with him up the bank to safety. It was ten minutes to twelve. I had to stand then holding the fish to have my photograph taken. I fear that, when it is shown to visitors next winter, I shall be neurotically deprecating about the smallness of the salmon. But *that* moment was sweet. So also was the moment when the cooked fish was set before me to serve all the family and, by common consent, I awarded myself the *curadh-mhír* or hero's portion.

Lest I should become too proud, I was subdued again before the week was out when a much larger salmon swung round unexpectedly and broke my cast with his tail. This was a fiercely acrobatic fish which I held for quite a while and I have yet to consult the experts on what went wrong. However, the incident established a kind of natural balance – in favour of the salmon and of personal humility – which I feel to be right and proper.

The sense of duty and purposiveness with which I am sometimes overburdened had drained away. So interested was I in fishing that I ignored rain and wind and could not bring myself to read or write. It required resolution even to make a short tour of the countryside, beautiful and varied though it is, with mountains, enclosed inlets, caves and high grey-white cliffs.

To be away from the river was a deprivation. This devotion brought other rewards. There was the evening when an old man joined the children and myself on the river bank and then, as I rested against the hedge with the hay field behind, recited for me a long story in Irish about a gambler who sold his soul to a beautiful she-demon for the certainty of winning at cards and how he was rescued from the jaws of hell by the clever help of an apostate priest, himself saved in the end. A

stranger, indeed even an Irishman, might pass through the whole district without being aware that any language but English was spoken and this old man would have kept talking to me in English if I had not expressed an interest in Irish and invited him to speak it. Where else in Western Europe would a visitor have the good fortune of hearing from an old man by fire or riverside a stylised tale which had been transmitted orally from generation to generation? As a form of entertainment it is no longer fashionable. I regarded my experience as a rich reward for intermittent and minor fidelity to tradition.

I packed the boot of the car in the early morning in the quiet village street as the bell rang for Mass and the strong-smelling turf smoke swirled about in a breeze that was already lifting the rain clouds and revealing a blue sky. The river would be about right. But another year must go by before I could fish it again.