Stalking Dreams in Hibernia

STORY AND PAINTINGS BY **GALEN MERCER** PHOTOS BY **WALTER HODGES**

THE IRISH, ONE MIGHT SAY, are practiced in the art of redemption. A quality as integral to the national character as wit and every bit as polished, it currently warms the soul of areas as diverse as business, art, food and sport. Change and renewal are afoot, to be felt in the digital boardrooms, along the boulevards and in the back alleys, whispering through the gorse thickets and sweeping irrepressibly up the coasts. It is an exciting time to be in Ireland, to be Irish.

Tasting the land through a brief art fellowship several years back, I'd yearned to return, this time to fish. Specifically, I wished to experience that facet of Irish sport least exploited or promoted there for reasons both complex and a touch mysterious: Her trout fishing. Something within me had communed with these trout streams for years, had sensed, especially given my initial acquaintance, their potential as among the most idyllic, challenging and fascinating fisheries in the world.

Was this daft? Shouldn't it be the salmon or sea trout fishing compelling me, as it does so many others? One can scarce crack a sporting magazine without encountering some castle-festooned article extolling the isle's famous-name salmon waters, the camaraderie of Irish gillies or requisite toasts hoisted upon besting *salar*. Meanwhile it would seem that her remarkable and diverse store of trout streams, especially limestoners, whose bounteous form is beloved to American anglers, might as well be located on Mars.

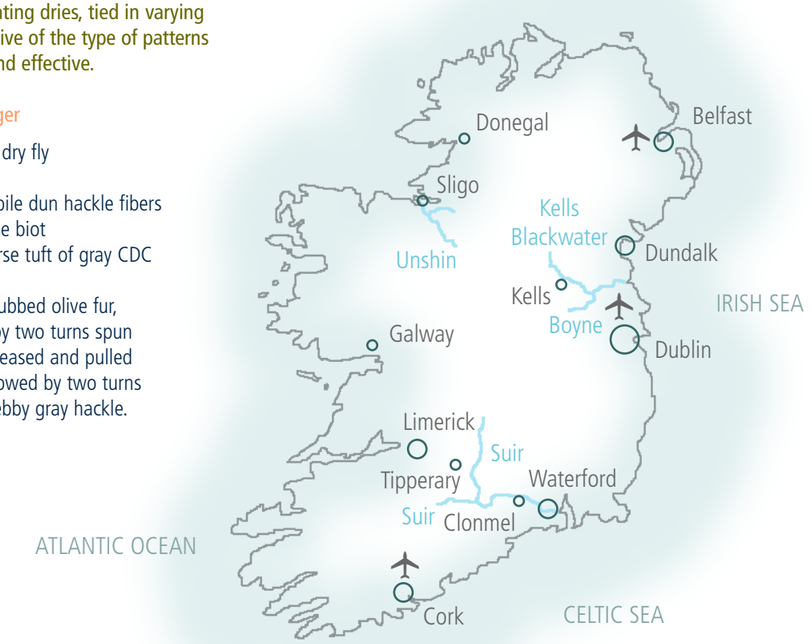
Beguiled by visions of crystalline spring water, I'd long dreamt of this particular fishing, so closely resembling the exalted chalkstreams across the Irish Sea. And unlike their English counterparts, most Irish trout remain "wild," an immeasurable plus. Too, the streams are relatively accessible and a great bargain to fish, certainly in contrast to those in England and even western U.S. spring creeks. For years, I'd been filing everything I could glean about this fishing, yet getting the full-frontal skinny proved maddeningly difficult. When opportunity to return both to paint and write about the waters of my delirium presented itself, I leapt.

Conventional avenues of inquiry yielding little, I turned to the Internet, which also proved frustrating. Keying "Irish country lodgings," for example, taught me that while salmon fishing topped lists of "regional activities," trout fishing, when mentioned at all, tended to be prioritized below gardening, even dog racing, prompting a friend to quip "Well, Ireland does have some rather good dogs."

< Olives being a staple of Irish trout streams, this group of low floating dries, tied in varying shades, is representative of the type of patterns Mercer used and found effective.

Olive Drowned Emerger

Hook: Light wire dry fly
Thread: Olive
Tail: A few mobile dun hackle fibers
Body: Olive goose biot
Wing: Short, sparse tuft of gray CDC
Thorax and Legs: Roughly dubbed olive fur, followed by two turns spun olive fur (teased and pulled back), followed by two turns of soft, webby gray hackle.



Galen brings a Kells Blackwater brown trout to net.

PREVIOUS PAGE: A Mercer landscape of the river Suir.

I telephoned, drafted letters and banged out e-mails desperately seeking scoop. "Try late May or early June. Best chance for consistent surface feeding and the weather will likely have settled," responded various worthies. Then, thanks to Peter O'Reilly, Ireland's current *Taoiseach* (Gaelic for chieftain) of anglers, and his indispensable work *Rivers of Ireland* (1991), plus innumerable other calls, the names of the best waters and beats began to emerge.

Galen Mercer and Pat Mcloughlin discuss the best approach to rising brown trout.

The River Suir made everybody's list, likewise the Boyne and its exquisite tributary, the Kells Blackwater. Include them in! The Maigue, alas the Maigue (rueful note to Tom McGuane—yup, it's pretty much a goner), once among the world's loveliest trout streams, and perhaps Ireland's most storied, had finally, after ceaseless and soulless sundering by bureaucrats, largely given up the ghost. Even to make its acquaintance, friends advised, "would surely break your heart." I did of course, and it did. Well then, what of the Clare, or perhaps the Liffey, Dublin's lifeblood and inspiration to painters from Jack Yeats to Robert Motherwell? Was not this stream's fertility such that her trout had among the fastest growth rates in Europe? There was also the gem-like Fergus in the west, and the mysterious Unshin, reputed to hold rising eight-pound trout, further north.

Flushed with these possibilities, I decided to adopt tactics befitting the grace and beauty I foresaw. I'd fish the lightest tackle and only to working, sighted fish holding the trickiest lies. Less the overarching undertones and all that upstream versus downstream bullshit, I'd do Halford on the opposite side of the Irish Sea. Mine would be classic sport; a test and I hoped a personal vision, conforming to the ancient adage "fair play's a jewel."

A fly tier unfamiliar with Gaelic bugs, I begged a copy of John Goddard's canonical *Trout Fly Recognition* (1976) and hunkered down to study. There were caddisflies known as silverhorns and grey flags (so-called because they flit among "flags" or river iris), as well as the obliquely named Welshman's buttons; mayflies comprised sky blues, turkey browns, brook duns, and spurwings. The incidentals counted buzzers, hawthorn flies and black gnats, not to mention reed smuts. It seemed attractive and fulsome language, utterly entwined with the lyricism of waters and wood and different from our own practice of going for the throat when it comes to the handle. I spun swarms of black gnats and falls of sherry spinners, assembled broad rafts of caperers.

Olive Flymph

Hook: Light wire dry fly
Thread: Olive
Tail: A few gray hackle fibers
Body: Golden olive silk, sparsely dubbed with olive fur
Wing: Sparse gray CDC
Legs: A few turns of soft, webby gray hackle

ULTIMATELY THREE STREAMS WERE CHOSEN: the Suir, Boyne and, a wild card, the Unshin. Irish sages offered their blessings, particularly knowing the Suir and Boyne also boasted fine limestone tributaries, which seemed to assure more than enough water. They did, however, express reservations about my tackle initiative, wondering colorfully how I might fare "jousting with whales." Such was drowned by the blood coursing in my ears, for by now the scent had consumed me with that madness peculiar to angler-knights and those on the make. The flash from across the pond, I'd show these Celtic naiads, pipe them a new tune.

It didn't quite work out that way.

Landing at Shannon Airport, I was met both by a prime day and my fishing companion, Seattle photographer Walter Hodges, appearing unreasonably fresh considering his gruesome coastal displacement. We headed for the Suir.

Having heard disquieting reports of impending rain, I was buoyed by the tracts of crisp, white clouds against a resonant blue sky, ambassadors of the northern marine climate. Meandering, we passed hillsides sanguine with blooming rhododendron, became lost, then sought directions from an older gent out strolling. "My, you are rather lost!" he noted, before suggesting a bewildering array of routes and sending us off brightly with a lyrical "It will be a lovely drive!" He appeared genuinely delighted for us.

Andrew Ryan operates a facility of the sort familiar to most traveling American anglers but still something of a novelty in Ireland, a full-service fishing and guide operation complete with motel. Called the Clonanav Flyfishing Center, it is located near the charming town of Ballymacarbry. The scheme seems to have legs for there's already considerable demand for this skilled guide and superb angler's services. Finding fishermen from a half dozen countries ensconced under his roof, we received things neat. Fishing was "wicked slow," the rivers high and dirty, hatches spotty, the season perhaps two weeks behind schedule.

The Suir, like many other Irish rivers, holds both trout and salmon. Almost 120 miles long, it is

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My first presentation went awry and so I waited and then cast again. The trout took and I felt its weight as it drove an angry wave toward midstream and then back again.

Ireland's second longest after the Shannon. More than half its length is classic limestone trout water. Slithering seductively between rushes and bordered by ruins and lush fields, it looked provocative even under present conditions. Our fishing was to begin on the peaceful reaches above Clonmel, a town surrounded by apple orchards and home to a delicious hard cider named Bulmers, purveyed in pint bottles so heavy they're prized by barfighting specialists and banned in some pubs. Andrew related tales of 10-pound trout that had once fed on the leavings of a now-defunct bacon factory to be caught by locals who baited hooks with an Irish sausage called white pudding. The Suir still yields some such fish.

The night being squally the Suir went high. Andrew suggested retreating to a small tributary, the Anner, which proved charming, intimate but not constraining, and gracefully overhung by arched willows. Full but clear, its currents were defined by undulating beds of weed. Trout were working, their rises subtle, cadged in the shifting mosaic. A heron departed as I eased into the water. The fish were taking black gnats which resemble our biting blackflies but fortunately don't. Gathering strands of weed one could easily amass fistfuls of their larvae. They are the bread and butter of most Irish trout streams.

I loved the Anner on sight, taking deep little browns readily, yet the larger fish remained reluctant. A brief moment of "sunk fly" temptation occurred when two good trout—one pushing 20 inches—appeared deep over a patch of exposed gravel. Fighting leaden thoughts, and Andrew's strenuous urgings, I saw my window close when our fish lit out in pursuit of another trout. It was good knowing they were there. Excitement flared anew when a stealthy horse attempted making off with Walter's rod (photographing, he'd briefly laid it in a pasture); then we were driven to lunch by storms.

The Suir is crisscrossed with handsome limestone bridges and many mysterious, grotto-like limekilns still remain, half hidden in adjacent shrubbery. One pool we tried, although the water was essentially blown out, lay beneath an ancient stone factory now housing a bakery. Tantalizing smells of fresh bread wafted down to us through the trees.

Friends had recommended a stretch about 40 miles upstream, flowing from a 12th-century abby that literally shadows the currents in the town of Holycross to a span known as the Two-Ford Bridge. Under improving skies, we left Andrew to his international charges and headed upriver. We found this water gentler and more sheltered, flowing sinuously between reedy banks studded with iris, the surrounding fields principally dairyland. It was our hope that this renowned dry-fly water would have escaped the unseasonable rains relatively unscathed, as it apparently had from "spoil," a term Irish angler-conservationists use to connote the shameful byproduct of dredging and channelization.

The Arterial Drainage Scheme (bleak term!) is one more example of man's dully-conceived attempts to rethink nature. Crudely envisioned to control seasonal flooding and raise the quality and value of farm acreage, it was foisted upon the Irish countryside during the Marshall Plan years by a strong agricultural lobby and self-serving coterie of civil servants. It has since proven the uncontestable ruination and blight of scores of once-vital trout and salmon streams, while its positive value remains arguable.

Tracking the streambanks, shovels drag up streambed, disgorging the results alongside the rivers.

FACING PAGE: Galen Mercer shows off a typical Kells Blackwater brown.


"Irish brown trout,
like the country itself,
hold the authority of
possession,
the power of magic."

PREVIOUS PAGE: An Irish dream of casting to trout in the shadow of Markee Castle on the Unshin River near Sligo.

This "spoil" forms a sordid weal, beyond which livid scars, the fisheries are usually straightened, spread and deepened, a procedure predictably undermining riverine health. The river's natural form, its weeds, spawning gravel and aquatic insects are all eviscerated. Once a river is so "improved," even partial recovery takes years.

Thankfully, within the past decade the European Union, of which Ireland is an enthusiastic member, has implemented some progressive legislation to help stem this archaic practice. To herald what might be called a tenuous return to grace, laudable programs such as re-introduction of gravel, placement of strategic wing dams and the critical reforming of meanders, are now underway on many waters. As anglers elsewhere have learned, the capacity of natural systems to heal can be astonishing.

The upper Suir teemed with possibility. Scads of resolutely green darnerflies stitched the air over paths strung with spider webs. A glittering European kingfisher shot past, a great gift, while yellow wagtails fed vigorously between grassy tufts. From a copse across the river, wood pigeons echoed softly back and forth. And there was the Mayfly.

A typical Irish tackle shop logo found on the side of a building in Donegal.

To European fly fishers, especially those angling the length and breadth of "the Isles," the behemoth known simply as "the Mayfly" *(Ephemera danica/vulgata)* has been virtually deified. As with our own eastern green drake, which it resembles, its appearance marks the high point each angling season, inspiring frenzies. References to the insect can be found in Joyce. Its emergence has come to be known as the "duffer's fortnight," and on Ireland's west coast, some towns formerly closed schools to enable children to gather and sell jars of the insects to lough anglers for use as bait. Not every Irish river boasts

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this plentitude and hitting it just right can be as unpredictable as happening into clouds of drakes here. Yet, catching it flush can prompt the experience of a season, occasionally a lifetime. I'd concocted innumerable imitations then crossed my fingers in much the same way an Irish fly fisher might cross himself. Now I actually faced a promising hatch.

Moving Letort-fashion, several paths back, using rushes and stands of glowing, yellow iris to mask movement, we scouted for rises, especially those suggestive of Leviathan. These reaches manifest that oily, deep quality that nearly shrieks big fish and this imminence added considerably to the queasy delight a steadily mounting hatch can produce. Small trout fed enthusiastically. Periodically a jaw-dropping displacement would echo up, signaling a big fish. This became a pattern, a phenomenon I was altogether too familiar with as a consequence of being faced with hatching drakes during high water at home. It was disheartening for I knew well it was no place for my dries. Nymphing would also prove difficult, given the depth and sporadic nature of the feeding combined with the water's recent peatiness. Sinking hopes briefly rose while I watched spinners accumulate in the long Irish dusk, but disappeared when they did.

Afterwards, changing by our car, several local anglers drifted over and in a flask's mutual ease we had a Straw Dogs moment. While discussing the bane of local angling tourneys (wildly popular events throughout Europe—the trouting versions make our bass competitions seem effete by comparison) and the fact that they still killed fish, our talk segued into otters, another beloved angler's scapegoat. After duly considering otter hounds and the ancient sport of coursing, we veered suddenly into mink and stag poaching, the latter using a wildly improbable greyhound-pit bull crossbreed, and finally organized badger baiting. Great avidity registered in the faces of our companions, one of whom turned to me at a pause and whispered with conspiratorial pleasure, "Ahhh, the things men get up to!" Admittedly, it was fascinating, if a bit hair-raising, and testament to the subterranean vigor of archaic country pursuits. Each avowed himself a staunch practitioner of catch-and-release.

Next day, Andrew introduced us to another of the Suir's pristine feeders, the elegant, if inelegantly named, Tar. Fishing near the town of Goatenbridge, we were astonished by the dense masses of white-flowering ranunculus, a sign of the river's extraordinary fertility. Again we found trout working black gnats and managed some good, if not huge, fish. At one point, wading quietly around a trailing willow, I encountered a mute swan head-on. These birds are a fixture on Irish waters, appearing the quintessence of graceful composure from afar but, startled, the large bird behaved churlishly, arching violently and hissing like a cat. Startled myself, I laughed nervously, recalling accounts of such birds killing sheep in Iceland. Possibly for reasons of overpopulation, Tar fish tend to be smaller and, after a morning of such fishing, my thoughts kept returning to the Mayfly and the upper Suir. With little reason to expect a different outcome, we again demonstrated dream's dominion over reason by bolting upriver. Predictably, we found things unchanged—clouds of flies, sporadic boils from the

Olive Emerger

Hook:	Light wire dry fly
Thread:	Olive
Tail:	Sparse CDC
Body:	Olive goose biot
Wing Pad:	Small piece of gray ethafoam, shaped into a ball
Thorax:	Olive fur
Legs:	Olive hackle, wound parachute beneath wing pad

FACING PAGE: The doorway to the 18th century bed and breakfast Woodtown house near the town.

nether regions, a general dearth of activity. Departing the Suir, one of the loveliest trout streams imaginable, I felt an unspecific mixture of sadness and regret.

We relished a newly emerged sun while heading toward the Boyne and her branch river the Kells Blackwater. The Kells Blackwater, one of numerous Blackwaters in Ireland, has in particular a long association with dry-fly fishing. Approaching the historic town of Kells, we wound through narrow, twisting lanes flanked by terraced, pastel-colored row houses. The Irish flair for the sign was abundantly apparent, the air suffused with the sweet aroma of burning peat. Headed for Woodtown House, an 18th-century manor operating as a B&B, we proceeded through Athboy where we found the air festive with preparations for a pageant. Leaving town we passed a trainer exercising greyhounds alongside the road.

We arrived late to Woodtown to be enveloped in Irish solicitude by the active proprietress, Anne Finnegan. Taking rooms and pulling loose from tea's gravity, we departed for the Stoneyford, where we met David Byrne, who works for Ireland's Eastern Regional Fisheries Board. David was involved in a pilot program known as the Boyne Valley Fishery, among the first attempts in Ireland to actively market a region's fishing potential. Among other things, they'd assembled critical information concerning local waters, were centralizing and upgrading standards for guides and had prepared maps and useful tourist information packages. Their thoroughness is impressive and the river maps are perhaps the best I've encountered.

With the air softening and skies again tipping gray, we chatted while casually fishing this tiny spring-fed tributary. Though it displayed unmistakable marks of past dredging, it was appealing nonetheless and rapidly yielded a score of small, vivid trout, testimony to both the resilience and inherent potential of these resources.

Discussing the obvious need for both greater protection and better management of Irish rivers, David opined that such tools as catch-and-release and the sectional slot limit, standard today on waters worldwide, would come but slowly to Ireland which still labors under the pall of the Great Famine. Coupled with a propensity for suspicion of authority and intransigence to regulation—by-products of centuries of dictatorial governance—too often, he noted, trout fishing continues to be afforded little status beyond its value for sustenance. I had heard this repeatedly since arriving in Ireland and worried change might evolve too little too late.

David suggested I discuss the issues with Pat Mcloughlin, a renowned gillie, member of the Kells Angling Association, and catalyst for much of the good occurring on the Boyne-Blackwater system. We met him on the Blackwater the next morning where a misting rain was already falling and conditions were generally similar to those on the Suir. Pat judged the Blackwater as about a foot above normal; however, it remained clear and we hoped for warming air to spur both hatches and rising fish. The chill persisted and, our morning water seeming lifeless, we opted for town, lunch and conversation.

Entering Irish pubs one is reminded that they remain, at heart, family places. Children are a familiar sight. We ordered a hot lunch while about us images of Gaelic football (nominally an "amateur" sport, it reminded me of dog-fighting) swirled on large-screen televisions. Periodically, the startling howl of

We arrived late to Woodtown House, an 18th century manor opporating as a B&B, only to be enveloped in solicitude by the active proprietress and the gravity of late afternoon tea.

I crossed to a lovely flat, the far bank of which was defined by a carmel-tinged lick of foam. Suddenly, along side that foam, a flick of movement, then another. Trout were up, siphoning black gnats.

"GOALLL…!" would go up from a crowd of boys. Over pints and the din we discussed Pat's long association with his beloved Blackwater.

Employed as an ironsmith, Pat is the emblematic old-school riverman. Son and grandson of passionate sportsmen, his grandfather was perhaps the first to fish the dry fly locally while his father notched several salmon bettering 40 pounds. Pat grew up alongside the rivers and fished them since childhood. His manner is unassuming yet exudes concentration. Alert eyes beam from a ruddy complexion knowing much weather, and emotions track across his face as quickly as cloud shadows on a blustery day. He laughs easily and as he is comfortable with himself it's easy to be with him and to have faith in his judgment.

He detailed the travails of so many Irish trout streams: the insidious vandalism of dredging, ecological apathy and general indifference. Impoverished through much of its history, he explained, Ireland never developed the mantle of clubs, fishing estates or wealthy individual sportsmen, which and who elsewhere in Europe helped ennoble trout fishing. Lacking such, and the power and care flowing from them, great mischief could be had at habitat's expense. With an improved economy, though, and an outpouring of national pride, it's beginning to change, he reflected. On the Kells Blackwater, in particular, there are now both selectively managed stretches and no-kill sections, and her stock of wild, exceptionally lovely trout has increased. The future here and elsewhere seems promising at last.

As do many good sportsmen, Pat operates by a personal code, which became evident when after lunch we moved to a section known as Maudlin Bridge. We'd been looking forward to fishing it so were dismayed to encounter a guided party preparing to head up. A bad break but no big deal for anglers accustomed to public water bacchanals in the U.S. Yet Pat's look had unmistakably hardened and, excusing himself briefly, he drifted over to engage the other guide.

We were puzzled. They'd arrived first, we reasoned, and there appeared no shortage of water. Was he pulling rank? Did he feel proprietary about this stretch? We watched and waited while Pat concluded then returned mum. We moved on. Nothing was said until the next morning when we again encountered the same party there, and Pat made it clear that his issue was never claim but stewardship. A confirmed believer in resting one's water, both for reasons of form and to mitigate pressure, Pat was offended by what he perceived as an affront to the river. Displaying a high sense of professionalism, Pat typically won't return to a section he's just fished for several days afterward. The gillie had transgressed by returning to a stretch several days running. The second time they spoke the air crackled and, returning, Pat would allow only that he found the other man's approach "a bit forceful for my taste."

The other guide and his party left.

Dogged by storms, our hopes rose with newly clearing skies as we walked toward a buttermilk-colored Georgian manor, the grounds adorned by towering stands of ancient oak, beech and flowering chestnut. Beyond us the fields were a carpet of luminous buttercups. Herons worked springs alongside the river and we arrived to find small, dark olives hatching.

I crossed to a lovely flat, the far bank of which was defined by a caramel-tinged lick of foam. Shading my eyes, I was pleased to note glare. Suddenly, alongside that foam, a flick of movement, then another. Trout were up, siphoning black gnats. The rises frequently backed under the foam line, and were of that order of subtlety that suggested other fish going undetected. Taking a favorable angle, I attached a speck of midge and paused to observe a push, a snout. It was a pod, tightening their feeding, taking advantage of the respite.

Olive Sidewinder

Hook: Light wire dry fly
Thread: Olive
Tail: Glossy dun hackle, tied split
Body and Thorax: Olive poly dubbing
Wings: Two matching sections of duck quill, taken from the primary feathers

Galen and Pat Mcloughlin discuss possible emerger patterns to use in the early morning.

Conditioned by weather to anxiety, I broke with conventional strategy in choosing what seemed the best fish instead of the chance for multiple hookups. My first presentation went awry and so I waited, then cast again. The trout took and I felt its weight as it drove an angry wave toward midstream then back again sharply, shearing me off near the bank. The essential action took seconds, but looped in my mind, a sly taunt. I reloaded and marked another nudger several feet below the first, altering my position slightly.

An unruly gust ruffled the surface and feeding immediately slowed. Praying for a lull, I squinted for traces of activity until my eyes watered. Activity. Awkward with excitement, I made several pitches in search of a satisfactory drift, and again there was weight followed almost instantly by that nasty

We returned to Woodtown House. We knew the rivers could deliver as well as anywhere. But nature seemed to have hardened her face. With periodic infusions of peat, we sipped our whiskey. We brooded.

scraping of teeth, the hook pick, pick, picking its way out until it hung harmlessly over a big, fading swirl. My neck bore the brunt of another gust. It grew steadily cooler and darker and I could not help but curse my luck for soon the streamside rushes were dancing, the river's surface chaotic. It was evident the fish had vanished. Though frustrating, the glimpse of sport we might expect should things only gentle was reason for encouragement.

Presently, Pat and Walter drifted by and, over a blustery picnic featuring wonderful Irish cheeses and the aforementioned cider, we discussed the optimistic signs of the morning. These, as it turned out, would have to suffice, for the weather again closed back in. Stowing rods that evening we listened to the distant clamor of a victory procession returning from a football match in Dublin.

Later in Athboy, we encountered the festival crowds in full revelry, streets seething with boisterous young people flowing from party to party. We walked as though swimming against a tide, the faces about us seeming to portray at once unbridled pleasure beneath which there simmered some much darker interior quality. Though feeling slightly removed, we downed several pints in smoky SRO pubs as musicians delighted the crowds.

Awakening the next morning I felt ebullient in my large, light-filled room. Gazing out the window I watched as jostling cloud shadows pitched across the vivid green geometry of winter wheat and sugar beets. We ate a restorative breakfast featuring the daunting gamut of Irish charcuterie then, escorted by our hostess Anne, emerged into yet another "soft" day. That she remained there, fervently waving us off in the rain, spoke to a density of congeniality that was astonishing.

David had intended an introduction to the Boyne, but the weather degenerated so completely we never got close to waders, settling for a clapping-wipers day of touring. I don't wish to appear a cultural ingrate; Trim Castle, the megalithic tombs at Newgrange—each is marvelously captivating on its own terms—but for the weather to force such things upon us pent-up fly fishers it was akin to diverting the attention of working hounds.

Back on the Blackwater, fishing a lovely stretch above Lloyd Bridge, we found bluebells and foxglove growing in profusion, their fronds pointing downhill, washed flat by days of rain. When I paused to reconnoiter beneath a gnarled hawthorn tree, my rod whacked a low branch, issuing a haze of midges and wee caddis. Ample eats, I thought, yet the relentless wind again thwarted our fishing. Amused over a small trout that engulfed my trailing fly, Pat allowed, "He'd be as apt to get a fight out of it as a meal."

We returned to Woodtown House feeling beleaguered. We knew the rivers could deliver as well as anywhere, and one couldn't envision prettier water on which to ply a line. But nature seemed to have hardened her face to us. Maintaining a low fire with periodic infusions of peat, we sipped our whiskey. We brooded.

The trip north toward Sligo and the Unshin was one of anticipation and uncertainty. As mentioned, there was the Unshin's reputation for yielding truly gigantic trout, as well as excellent

PREVIOUS PAGE: A landscape of the Kells Blackwater.
FACING PAGE: Patience and persistence can pay big dividends when quietly stalking trout in the late evening on the Suir.

hatches of Mayfly. On the downside, almost nothing was known about the fishing. Issuing from Lough Arrow, a spring-fed body of water ranked among Ireland's premier wild-trout fisheries, this stream was a conundrum.

As it would turn out, we never had a chance. The rains redoubled and our river went dark. Charles Cooper, affable owner of Markree Castle, whose estate boasts a nice stretch of the Unshin, conceded that this was turning out to be "a very bad year for the Mayfly." Early hatches, he said, soon gave way to the vagaries of weather. "I fear there aren't many left now," he told us ruefully.

Exploring in nearby Riverstown, I happened upon three French fly fishermen, devotees of Normandy's famed Risle and Andelle—among the best chalkstreams in Europe—who'd been fishing Irish limestoners for years. We edged tentatively into conversation, skirting the sad minefield of geo-political ill will, and were soon laughing at our sorry mutual plight. Theirs, in particular, was exacerbated by a vain search for what Frenchmen would consider "acceptable" seafood. Asked upon what they were subsisting, they declared in dismissive unison, "Pizza."

Two red-haired, freckled boys (clichés abound in small-town Ireland) suddenly materialized, enquiring enthusiastically if it was "trout you are after?" When we answered affirmatively, one of them added "If you be fly fishing, try back up that road." The French opted out, but after some refinement of directions, I headed off in pursuit and soon came to a very engaging stretch of river. Fairly narrow, it was bordered by quaking bog, the banks being deeply undercut. It was obviously big fish water, with some holes at the bends where I could almost submerge a seven-and-a-half-foot fly rod.

For purposes of reconnaissance, I stomped heavily in places I thought unsuitable for fishing and observed as several large, suggestive wakes streamed off the banks. However I saw neither bugs nor signs of feeding while the wind continued to sigh, the rain to fall. It simply wasn't going to happen and, my cap having blown off twice, I finally relented and headed back. It was hopeless, nothing to do but move on and so the next day we returned in the direction of what we both prayed might prove our angling salvation, the Kells Blackwater.

Alerted, the unflappable Finnegans stood ready late that afternoon, their welcome and generosity of spirit a balm to our badly frayed nerves. At some point during the haul, we'd emerged from the murk and now found ourselves in blessed sunshine. There was a shot. Bolting a restorative tea we raced for the river.

I was held by the memory of those discreet risers above Maudlin Bridge and, returning, was thrilled to see that we were alone. A lesson of this trip was that Irish trout typically become active later in the day then continue feeding for longer spells afterwards as a result of the lingering twilight. This advised a patient approach to our water.

Insects began assembling above the currents, including hordes of spinners, whose aversion to wind had kept them out of the picture for days. Drifting placidly back and forth, all seemed absorbed in the late, low warmth of the sun. With the light ambering we began to see rises. First to show, predictably, were the juniors, several missilling forth in hot pursuit of a freewheeling caddis. The majority fed quietly, somewhat surprising given the duration of their surface fast.

Having staked out the flat, I was forced after some waiting to conclude there wasn't much afin. The pool appeared quiet, with even the sharpies seeming absent. Wishing to cut my losses, I drifted back to survey other stretches. The specter of another whomping was looming and anxiety perked. Then I saw the backs.

Distributed throughout a full little belly of a pool, the trout were feeding determinedly, though in that genteel, limestone-manner that eschews unnecessary movement. Now and again, one would drop form to clout one of the robust caddisflies just emerging. I recall wondering whether these were caperers. As light dissolved the gouts became flares marking a fish's position. Drawing in low on hand and knee, to the edge of cattle-cropped banks, I quietly slipped into the water below a fish and tried to plate the fly cleanly. Inches counted. It was intense, exciting, intimate fishing. We marveled at, then released, each trout—a number of which, particularly after so many drubbings, were better than fine. It was blissful.

A pastoral scene on the Kells Blackwater as fishermen scan the surface for rising trout.

In the blurred wantonness of those moments was the fishing I'd journeyed for, visions of which had roiled my dreams through the years. The Blackwater and other Irish streams like it are a paradigm, representing both beauty and sport too rapidly passing from this world. Yet one cannot but remain hopeful that, especially in the present climate of renewal, such spirits will ultimately summon hearts open to themselves and that these national treasures will receive the nurturing and protection they merit. Let it be said of this fishing and this country, for that matter, that it casts no mere spell. There's much more to it than that. www.cfb.ie/fishing_in_ireland/trout/trout.htm

Galen Mercer is a painter with ruinous tendencies towards fly-fishing travel. He and his wife, Jaimie, live halfway between Lupa Restaurant in Manhattan and the Roscoe Diner, perched on a Hudson Valley orchard among a welter of brushes, fly rods and loose scraps of dubbing. This is his first visit to the *UpStream* confessional.

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