

About 3750 words

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THE BEST OF IT

A hawthorn fire sheltered our lunch-time fire from northerly gusts of drizzle but did not block our view of the River Blackwater. The view was important. Grey Flag sedges hatch in bursts on the early-May days that the Irish call "soft," and there were not so many bursts that Ned and I were willing to miss any of them. So we cooked and looked and talked. The cooking involved pink slabs of fish. The looking was for another trout that might rise splashily in the riffle, or quietly in the head of the pool. The talking was of fish and women and caddisflies and other streams and women and mayflies. That was when Ned and I were alone. Then my girl came down from the car with a loaf of brown bread, and we talked only of fishing. Anna accused us of having a limited conversational range.

The fire was Ned Maguire's doing, and without it there would have been no grilled trout or talk. After searching a couple of miles of river in the morning, I'd have settled for a rest and tea from the Volcano kettle: a contraption that boils water with newspapers for fuel. Ned was set on a full-formal luncheon, and he had prowled up and down enough hedgerows to find dry wood.

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Ned had an experienced Billy-can for the tea water. After a bit of the Blackwater River inside the can seemed to have been sterilized, he poured in a fist of loose tea. Then when the brew was poured into the cups, he had a little glass bottle of milk for it. This gear fit inside a rough canvas bag he'd sewn up himself back when his Hardy St. George reel sold for two pounds sixteen shillings and sixpence, and there wasn't much left over for fancy bags. But no cup of tea ever tasted like the ones coming from that hand-sewn canvas. There was some special combination of north-sea mist and wood smoke and tea leaves and alkaline river water fertilized by dairy cows. After a sip of that brew, let alone a mug, we were full of conversation.

It also happens that Irish coarse bread -- they call it brown cake -- is the best in the world, and the Blackwater produces the only river trout I have ever tasted that are as good as fresh-run salmon. Moreover Anna looked like a ballet dancer having a picnic, which she was.

By this time Ned and the Blackwater, well mixed, had made a purist of me. The conversion was reluctant and temporary. Like most Americans, I had been determined to fish blind when there were no rises to cover, and I went at it with deep nymphs and wet

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flies and occasionally streamers. These things had worked for refractory brown trout in the Brodhead and the Beaverkill and the Firehole. No one was going to tell me that the trout were different in County Meath. Certainly Ned did not tell me: He was a mite hard of hearing under any circumstances and stone deaf when he did not fancy the question.

So I flogged away. You can't catch fish unless your fly is in the water. Ned wobbled up and down the banks with his fly out of the water, declining even to assemble his rod unless he saw a fish rise. His eyes, however, were one bit of his anatomy in good operating condition. I would come in with a tennis elbow and Ned would come in with a trout. He wouldn't have fished much: just a few casts for a fish that was demonstrably in the mood. Ned caught a lot of fish with his fly out of water.

Halford and Francis Francis were known to have fished the Blackwater, taking a train to the old Virginia Road Station and hiking down from O'Daly's Bridge. Ned and Anna and I had arrived by BMW, but we took the same hike along a river that had not changed since the Middle Ages -- at which time, for all anyone knows now, it might have been surrounded by more trees and less pasture. Certainly the river had not changed much since one Gregory Greendrake described it in the early nineteenth century. The nearby Moynalty had been even better back then, but recently it had been "drained" -- channeled, we Americans would say -- to "get the water off the land." Drainage spoiled some of the best pastures near the stream, but other land farther from the stream

was drier. It may have produced more dairy products to increase the European Community's vast surplus. The snipe were gone, and the big trout.

Meanwhile the Blackwater and Ned, both looking Medieval, had held up well. The pike and the Irish fishermen vied for the honor of eating the river's trout, but neither had succeeded entirely. The hatches and the cover and the water were good enough to keep the wariest fish ahead of the predators. And after some centuries of this, the Blackwater trout were very wary indeed. I asked Ned if he didn't think that Halford might have perfected Code of the Dry-Fly here rather than on the chalkstreams of England. In the clear, chalk-filtered water of Hampshire, you can see a trout that is not rising, and then sometimes you can catch him on frightfully unsporting flies. In the cloudy, cow-filtered Blackwater, you cannot spot a trout unless he is rising, and then a floating fly generally works better than anything else. Occasionally you do better with a fly of the kind that used to be called wet and is now a nymph. But this too must be fished near the surface, or you will not see the trout take.

Ned was not impressed by my query on the evolution of Halford's Dry-Fly Fishing in Theory and Practice. No class distinction attaches to trout in Ireland, and Ned had known, even before he could afford the tackle to fish dry, that his best chance of a good fish came on the first few casts, before the flies started to sink. That was how he got in the habit of carrying his rod unstrung and his flies dry in a pigskin book. He

reckoned that the English, though slow on the subject of Irish politics, were bright enough to figure out what trout wanted before Halford wrote about it.

Ned did not supply much evidence, but in time I got through his book collection and saw from the underlining that he had given these matters some thought. He had many of the English books of the golden age. He lamented, however, that he had never seen a copy of Aldam's Quaint Treatise on "Flees, and the Art a Artyfishall Flee Making." I finally bought a copy at a price that seemed high then, but now looks like a wise investment.

Ned, who refused to show excitement while playing a wild three-pound brown trout, was moved by the book. Twice he said "I thought I'd go to my grave without seeing Aldam." He even stopped smoking for an hour or so as not to spill ashes on the Iron Blue or Watchett.

Ned would certainly not have wanted to be remembered as a purist, so I had better correct that impression. I never saw him use anything but dry flies, small nymphs, or a team of old-fashioned wets -- all fished in or near the surface. In his youth, however, there were still a lot of salmon in the Nore, and the Maguires of Stoneyford found that fish tasted just as good when they were not in the mood for feathers. Once Ned told me that Roundwood trout wanted nothing but a real minnow in March, and I guessed that he spoke with authority. Bohernabreena reservoir was strictly flies-only -- to protect Dublin's water supply -- but Ned felt sure that the fish would not scorn a

floating fly with a maggot wiggling on the point of the hook. A crisp false-cast would then remove the evidence in case a guard got curious. Instructions for this are nowhere to be found in Halford.

On our first hunting trip, Ned admitted with his customary modesty that he had shot a March Brown. This is a fly which, as you may recall, can be tied properly only from the wing-feather of a hen pheasant. Irishmen in full physical vigor are expected to refrain from mistakes of gender when chasing pheasants. There was, I gathered, a looser code for gentlemen of a certain age who wheezed like Ned Maguire. This struck me as a civilized distinction, though it might not persuade your average Pennsylvania warden.

It remains a mystery that Ned was able to walk far enough to shoot any bird of either sex. Part of the answer is that he let his English-setter bitch do the work. She was the only dog I had seen who could range wide and fast through a heather bog, then point gently enough to hold a snipe. When snipe are wild, this may be even tougher than holding ruffed grouse. All Irish snipe are wild.

Ned could not afford the gun he wanted, London-made doubles being more expensive than stylish home-made setters. But he claimed that his father could recognize a best-grade double in the hands of a strange hunter across a wide field, and Ned supposed that he could do likewise.

Come winter, we tied a lot of March Browns and their

relatives -- in my case with the help of a vise which, I argued, had been sanctioned by Halford. Ned, as usual, scorned decadent notions, and he held the hook in his fingers. He showed me -- and a couple of million Irish television viewers -- how to do the thing. Perhaps some of the others caught on. I did not.

I got the hang of the fishing, though, and most days could find more trout than Ned by virtue of better legs, lungs, and connections thereto. There were a few days when we could find nothing rising. But Blackwater fishing was really hunting in thin disguise, and we could usually hunt up one good trout if we persisted. At such times, Ned calculated that I needed a shot worse than he did. He would spot the trout of the day, come back down a half-mile of river, find me, and lead me to the game. You anglers out there will understand the value of that gift.

The one time Ned failed was when he saw a trout the size of a grilse rising for greendrakes. He was half frightened of it, he said, for he could not run fast enough or wade deep enough to play such a fish on trout tackle. I could, but Ned had to think about giving away a river brown bigger than he had ever caught. While he was having a smoke to calm his nerves, another angler came along and caught the trout. Seven pounds.

Ned's kindnesses extended to other American anglers, which is how he found himself cited in a couple of our magazines and pictured on the cover of one. And one day Ned tried to give three trout to another Yank -- a skilled angler who has not told me his side of the story, and who will therefore remain nameless.

The Yank had spent his week's expensive holiday without an honorable trout, which was an easy trick to accomplish on the Blackwater. On the last day of the stay, Ned (by his account, now) found three big fish rising in the deeps below Carnaross Bridge. he resisted the temptation to catch even one for a sample. Instead, he guided our friend, who was well capable of doing what needed to be done.

When the trout at the bottom of the pool rose calmly, however, our friend's splendid reflexes asserted themselves and ripped the fly away just as a large neb rose from the water. By now the angler was not as calm as his two remaining, potential victims. But he restrained himself, let the middle trout take firmly -- then popped the tippet with a mighty strike. At this point, says Ned, Black Gnats began dropping from the sallies, fried alive by high-voltage adjectives.

Ah, but the third fish still rose. And rose again for the Yank's fly, which had come down the water twitching prettily because of a slight tic in the casting arm. In addition to his talents at fly-tying, rod-building, and casting, our friend proved able to hold his breath for a full five minutes, by which time the trout had been played nearly to exhaustion. It turned out, however, to have one last leap in it, and at the end of the leap fell on a short, tight line, with the inevitable rending of nylon and nerves. The angler flung a Leonard cane rod down on the rocks and pleaded: "Holy God, will you have no pity on me?" Prayer, not blasphemy.

This tale, I think, provided Ned with more nourishment than mere trout flesh. I tell the story with both sympathy and empathy, and to derive this moral: We fish for emotion. The Blackwater could be counted on to produce it. You could expect blackest depression, spiritual fatigue, the pulse of a love about to be consummated, and levitation by excitement -- all in about fifteen minutes. In the long term, it may be that even the frustrated American angler appreciated those three trout. But maybe not quite as much as Ned.

When the evening rise was over and the last reflection from the western sky had left the water, Ned and I would hike back up to O'Daly's bridge by the megalithic burial mound. It was inhabited by a great many rabbits and, by some accounts, the odd ghost or two. I kept on hoping for that emotion too but met no spirits. I did, however, find some trout sipping spinners under a crabapple tree on the far bank. Eyes of some kind were out there watching me. The darkness would be punctuated by strange splashes, by the faint swish of my silk line, and perhaps by a supernaturally spirited trout.

No other stream in Ireland was possessed by quite the same spirits, perhaps because no other was quite as wild and fertile. The Suir may have been even better once, if we can believe Sir Edward Grey, but had been drained and repeatedly poisoned by a dairy. The Maigue was the loveliest stream in Europe, what with a 13th-century castle towering above wooded banks and fertile waters. I got three or four days there before the dredges came.

(One wonders if they got enough "water off the land" to compensate for the tourist fishery. Many an American angler today pays dearly for tamer trout.)

The Nore was next best to the Blackwater, and a lot easier -- if you had exactly the right combination. Ned had grown up on the Nore's banks, and he knew. He was, however, perfectly prepared to fish away chuckling while the Yanks figured it out on their own. Served them right for those lures they called streamers and the leaded grubs they called nymphs. I had heard his tales of this, and I did not aspire to be his next victim.

By then, however, I had figured out that an "exact imitation" (in human eyes) is not the way to catch fish when several dozen of them, up and down the stream, start feeding in the twilight on the nymphs of the Blue-Winged Olive. A little later the fish switch to falling spinners. Then a fly that looks good to people also looks good to the trout -- but the spinner rise does not last long enough. As dark descends, the duns emerge and the trouts' swirls eddy deeper. At that point, a fly with a blue wing and olive body does not work badly. To be precise, it does not work at all. And this is how Ned evened the score with people who did not elect an Irish President for almost two hundred years.

Just as the light grows too dim to change flies at all, splashy rises show that a few trout still want a pudding of succulent sedge. And with luck, that is when you get the best fish of the day. I did, and my diary claims that I had about

twenty more trout first on the three stages of the BWO. The Blackwater had taught me the riddle. Ned was, I think, just as pleased by my success as he would have been by a fuming failure. But not a bit more pleased.

I wasted the fish anyhow, Ned thought, by returning them to the stream. You could not eat a Nore trout unless you were awfully hungry. Ned did not eat them, but they looked lovely, and he gave them away with a flourish. The Blackwater fish he ate himself.

Next evening we fished the King's River -- home stream of Ned's youth, with limestone water of top quality and trout flesh to match. Ned's home in Bray was named Avonree, which is Irish for King's River. But the stream was too small to stand fishing pressures, and the big fish were gone. Some mid-sized trout did rise eagerly that night, and I was just as eager to catch them. This was a great Blue-Winged Olive stream, Ned had said, and I still had plenty of BWOs in all stages. They caught worth mentioning. Ned, meanwhile, took fish of the fat variety on a sedge. He served me one for dinner.

We talked it all over that winter, after shooting Ned's quota of March Browns and mine of Snipe and Purples. Nan Maguire had served us a comfortable tea. Ned talked best when he was allowed to sip a bottle of after-tea stout and muse on what he considered important, rather than responding to questions from me on the fastest way of catching the next trout.

He told me that he had sorted out the season's memories and

decided which ones he wanted for the permanent collection. The image that had aged best, he discovered, was of the time when Anna, with cheeks flushed from the mist, grilled a Blackwater trout over the coals, for the three of us. Anna, I guessed, had supplied the mermaid ingredient, which was seldom to be found on an Irish stream. Anyhow it was Ned's fire, my trout, Anna's brown cake, and our memory. When you get to Ned's stage you collect a different kind of emotion. My diary for the day had focused on the trout.

The Blackwater was really too much for Ned -- not that he would admit it -- and I always expected to be carrying him back. He would not have been hard to lift, but I was just as glad the occasion never arose. Once Tommy Corcoran had the honor. Both Ned and Tommy told me the story, so it is confirmed. Tommy got it from a laughing nurse who helped with the operation, and who knew the difference between courageous and outrageous. She was a Kilkenny girl with the equipment for sending a man to good dreams. As Ned drifted into an anesthetized sleep of unknown destination, he reached under her mini-skirt and gave her a firm squeeze in just about the spot where a mermaid's skin would turn to scales. Who says you can't take it with you?

It is also untrue, I learned, that you can never go back. Ned fished for years after that operation, and I went back to the Blackwater twice after leaving Ireland. The fishing had actually improved: maybe just to tease me and maybe because, by then, I had figured out the places where a trout might feed

surreptitiously on Black Gnats and Greendrakes and Alders.

On those last visits, Ned and I fished nowhere but the Blackwater. We had no good alternatives. Pollution had finished off the Blue-Winged Olives in the Nore and the Greendrakes of Lough Sheelin. In Lough Ennel and the Rye Water, even the trout were dead. Some of the drained streams were producing fish again but were not pretty. The Blackwater River appeared to be the last great limestone river in its original binding.

But it could not stay ahead of the dredges for much longer. On a soft day in May, Ned and I stood on O'Daly's bridge in the little stone coves where Gregory Greendrake and Halford and Francis Francis had stepped aside to get out of the way of carriages. A crane -- the mechanical kind -- was working in the flat below the bridge, tossing tons of prehistoric gravel and a few up-to-date trout onto the banks. Ned wished that the people who took decisions could have left one proper trout stream so that his grandchildren might see what God gave Ireland.

For himself, Ned had no complaints. "I've seen the best of it," he said, and he meant it. Born June 19, 1910, he had been around when modern cars made the best of streams available. He had grown up yearning for the perfect, out-of-reach tackle in the Hardy catalog and lived to catch hundreds of trout on a Ritz rod, while leaving the heavy old Hardy canes for rough use. Only a lot of modern medicine kept him alive long enough to see technology finish off the Blackwater.

That last May, Ned and I fished a few hundred yards and a

few hundred years ahead of the technology. The Blackwater insisted on surrendering its trout to half-hearted anglers. This time I kept all the fish, like Ned. A knock on the head seemed better than their alternatives.

On a Wednesday in January, Ned Maguire shot his last woodcock. He could not get far from the car by then, so I suppose that Tommy Corcoran pushed the bird in the right direction. Anyhow, Ned had the makings of more Woodcock and Yellows than he had time to tie. The dredges caught up with him on January 2, 1983. His last letter told me that he wouldn't know where to find fishing next season anyhow.

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The fire was Ned Maguire's doing, and without it there would have been no grilled trout, tea, or talk. After searching a couple of miles of river in the morning, I'd have settled for a rest and tea from the Volcano kettle: a contraption which boils water with newspaper fuel. Ned was set on a full-formal luncheon, and he had prowled up and down enough hedgerows to find dry wood. This despite the fact that

he was about twice my age and half my weight, what with his plumbing having been abbreviated during one of the ulcer operations. He would have been almost invisible if he had removed his tweed jacket with the leather patches.

Ned had an experienced billy-can for the tea-water. After a bit of Blackwater River inside the black can seemed to have been sterilized, he poured in a fist of loose tea. Then when the brew was poured into the cups, he had a little glass bottle of milk for it. This gear fit inside a rough canvas bag he'd sewn up himself back when his Hardy St. George reel sold for two pounds sixteen shillings and sixpence, and there wasn't much left over for fancy bags. But no cup of tea ever tasted like the ones coming from that hand-sewn canvas. There was some special combination of north-sea mist and woodsmoke and tea leaves and alkaline river water fertilized by dairy cows. After a sniff of it, let alone a sip, we were full of conversation.

It also happens that Irish coarse bread -- they call it brown cake -- is the best in the world, and the Blackwater produces the only river trout I have ever tasted that are as good as fresh-run salmon. Moreover Anna looked like a ballet dancer having a picnic, which she was.

By this time Ned and the Blackwater, well mixed, had made a purist out of me. The conversion was reluctant and temporary. Like most Americans, I had been determined to fish blind when there were no rises to cover, and I went at it with deep nymphs

and wet flies and occasionally streamers. These things work for refractory brown trout in the Brodhead and the Beaverville and the Firehole. No one was going to tell me that the trout were different in County Meath. Certainly Ned did not tell me: he was a mite hard of hearing under any circumstances and stone deaf when he did not fancy the question.

So I flogged away. You can't catch fish unless your fly is in the water. Ned wobbled up and down the banks with his fly out of the water, declining even to assemble his rod unless he saw a fish rise. His eyes, however, appeared to be one bit of anatomy that was in good operating condition. I would come in with a tennis elbow and Ned would come in with a trout. He wouldn't have fished much: just a few casts for a fish that was demonstrably in the mood. Ned caught a lot of fish with his fly out of the water.

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Drainage spoiled some of the best pastures along with the river, but other land upstream was drier. It may have produced more dairy products to contribute to the European Community's mountainous surplus. The snipe were gone, and the big trout.

Meanwhile the Blackwater and Ned, both looking medieval, had held up well. The pike and the Irish fishermen vied for the honor of eating the river's trout, but neither succeeded entirely. The hatches and the cover and the water were good enough to keep the wariest of the fish ahead of the predators. And after some centuries of this, those brown trout were very wary indeed. I asked Ned if he didn't think that Halford might have perfected *The Code* here rather than on the chalkstreams. In the clear, chalk-filtered water of Hampshire, you can see a trout that is not rising, and then sometimes you can catch him on frightfully unsporting flies. In the cloudy, cow-filtered Blackwater, you cannot spot a trout unless he is rising. And then a floating fly generally works better than anything else. Occasionally you do better with a fly of the kind that used to be called wet and is now a nymph. But this too must be fished near the surface, or you will not see the fish take.

Ned was not deeply impressed by my query on the evolution of Halford's Dry-Fly Fishing in Theory and Practice. The Irish had always known how to fish: there is no class distinction attached to the trout of the Blackwater. Before he could afford the tackle to fish dry, Ned had known that his best chance of a good fish came on the first few casts, before the

flies started to sink. That was how he got in the habit of carrying his rod unstrung and his flies dry in a pigskin book. He reckoned that the English, though slow on the subject of Irish politics, were bright enough to figure out what trout wanted before Halford wrote about it.

Ned did not supply much evidence, but eventually I got through his book collection and saw from the underlining that he had given these matters some thought. He had many of the English books of the golden age. He lamented, however, that he had never seen a copy of Aldam's Quaint Treatise on "Flees, and the Art a Artyfishall Flee Making." I finally bought a copy at a price that seemed excessive then. Ned, who refused to show excitement while playing a trout, was moved by the flies and tying materials set into the book. Twice he said "I thought I'd go to my grave without seeing Aldam." He even stopped smoking for an hour so as not to spill ashes on the Iorn* Blue or Watchett.

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After our first hunting trip, Ned admitted with customary modesty that he had "shot a March Brown." Then he sipped tea while I figured out the dimensions of the sin he was confessing. The March Brown is a fly which cannot be tied properly from the wing-feathers of the cock pheasant, and yet Irishmen in full fettle are expected to refrain from mistakes of gender when chasing pheasants. There was, I concluded, a looser code for gentlemen of a certain age who wheezed as much as Ned Maguire. This struck me as a civilized distinction, though it might not persuade your average Pennsylvania warden.

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But he claimed that his father could recognize a best-grade double in the hands of a strange hunter across a wide field, and Ned supposed that he could do likewise.

We tied a lot of March Browns and their relatives in the winter -- in my case with the help of a Thompson's vise which, I argued, had been sanctioned by Halford. Ned, as usual, was not interested in decadent theories, and he held the hook in his fingers. He showed me -- and a couple of million Irish television viewers -- how to do the thing. Perhaps some of the others caught on. I did not.

I got the hang of the fishing, though, and most days could find more trout than Ned by virtue of better lungs, legs, and connections thereto. There were a few days when neither of us could find anything decent rising. But Blackwater fishing was really hunting in thin disguise, and we could usually hunt up one good trout if we persisted. At such times Ned calculated that I needed a shot worse than he did. When he found the fish of the day, he would come back down a half mile of river, find me, and lead me to the game. You fishermen out there will understand the value of that gift. The one time he failed was when he saw a fish the size of a grilse taking greendrakes. He was half frightened of it, as he told me later, for he could not run fast enough or wade deep enough to play such a fish on a trout rod. I could, but Ned had to think about giving away a bigger river brown than he had ever caught. While he was smoking and thinking, another angler came along and caught the trout. Seven pounds.

Ned's kindnesses extended to other American anglers, which is how he got himself cited in a couple of our magazines and pictured on the cover of one. There was a day when Ned tried to give three trout to another Yank -- a skilled angler who has not told me his side of the story, and who will therefore remain nameless. This friend had spent his week's expensive holiday without an honorable trout, which is an easy trick to accomplish on the Blackwater. On the last day of the stay, Ned (by his account, now) found three big fish rising in the deeps below Carnaross Bridge. He resisted the temptation to catch even one for a sample. Instead, he guided our friend, who was well capable of doing what had to be done.

When the trout at the bottom of the pool rose calmly, however, our friend's splendid reflexes asserted themselves and ripped the fly away just as the large neb emerged from the water. By now the fisherman was not as calm as his two remaining, potential victims. But he restrained himself, let the middle trout take firmly -- then popped the tippet with a mighty strike. At this point, says Ned, black gnats began dropping from the sallies, fried alive by high-voltage adjectives.

Ah, but the third fish still rose. And rose again for the Yank's fly, which had come down the water twitching prettily from a slight tic in the casting arm. In addition to his talents at fly-tying, rod-building, and casting, our friend proved able to hold his breath for a full five minutes, by

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When the evening rise was over and the last reflection from the western sky had left the water, Ned and I would hike back up to O'Daly's bridge by the megalithic burial mound. It was inhabited by a great many rabbits, occasional badgers, and, by some accounts, the odd ghost or two. I kept on hoping for that emotion too but found no spirits. I did find some trout sipping by the crabapple tree on the far bank. Eyes of some kind out there were watching me. The darkness would be punctuated by strange splashes, by the faint swish of my line, and perhaps by a supernaturally spirited trout.

No other stream in Ireland was possessed by quite the same furies, perhaps because none of the others were quite as wild. The Suir may have been even better once, if we can believe Sir Edward Grey, but before I arrived it had been drained and repeatedly poisoned by a dairy. The Maigue was the loveliest river I saw in Europe, what with a 13th-Century castle towering above wooded banks and fertile waters. I got three or four days there before the dredges came. One wonders if they got enough "water off the land" even to compensate for loss of the tourist fishery. Many an American angler nowadays pays a hundred dollars a day for tamer trout.

The Nore was next best to the Blackwater, and a lot easier -- if you had exactly the right combination. Ned had grown up on its banks, and he knew. He was, however, perfectly prepared to fish away chuckling while the Yanks figured it out on their own. Served them right for those lures they called streamers and the leaded grubs they called nymphs. I had heard his tales of this, and I did not aspire to be the next victim. By then, however, I had figured out that an "exact imitation" (in human eyes) is not the way to catch fish when several dozen of them, up and down the stream, start feeding in the twilight on the nymphs of the Blue-Winged Olive. A little later the fish switch to falling spinners. Then a fly that looks good to people also looks good to the trout -- but the spinner rise does not last long enough. As dark descends, the duns emerge and the trouts' swirls eddy deeper. At that point, a fly with

a blue wing and an olive body does not work badly. To be precise, it does not work at all. And this is how Ned evened the score with people who did not elect an Irish President for almost two hundred years.

Just as the light grows too dim to change flies at all, splashy rises show that a few trout still want a pudding of succulent sedge. And with luck, that is when you get the best fish of the day. I did, and my diary claims that I had about twenty more fish first on the three stages of the BWO. The Blackwater had taught me the riddle. Ned was, I think, just as pleased by my success as he would have been by a fuming failure. But not a bit more pleased.

I wasted the fish anyhow, Ned thought, by returning them to the stream. You could not eat a Nore trout unless you were awfully hungry. Ned did not eat them, but they looked lovely, and he gave them away with a flourish. The Blackwater fish he ate himself.

Next evening we fished the King's River -- home-stream of Ned's youth, with limestone water of top quality and trout flesh to match. Ned's home in Bray was named Avonree, which is Irish for King's River. But the stream was too small to stand fishing pressures, and the big fish were gone. Some mid-sized fish did rise eagerly that night, and I was just as eager to catch them. It was a great BWO stream, Ned had said, and I still had plenty of BWOs in all stages. They caught nothing worth mentioning. Ned, meanwhile, took fish of the fat variety on a sedge. He served me one of them for dinner.

We talked it all over that winter, after shooting Ned's quota of March Browns and mine of Snipe and Purples. Nan Maguire had served us a comfortable tea. Ned talked best when he was allowed to sip a bottle of after-tea stout and muse on what he considered important, rather than responding to questions from me on the fastest way of catching the next trout.

He told me that he had finished sorting out the season's memories and decided which ones he wanted for the permanent collection. The image that had aged best, he discovered, was of the time when Anna, with cheeks flushed from the mist, grilled a Blackwater trout over the coals, for the three of us. Anna, I guessed, had furnished the mermaid ingredient, which is usually the hardest thing to find in fishing. Anyhow it was Ned's fire, my trout, Anna's brown cake, and our memory. When you get to Ned's stage you collect a different kind of emotion. My diary for the day had focused on the trout.

The Blackwater hike was really too much for Ned -- not that he would admit it -- and I always expected to be carrying him back. He would not have been hard to lift, but I was just as glad the occasion never arose. Once Tommy Corcoran had the honor. Both Ned and Tommy survived to tell about the experience, so the rest of the story is independently confirmed. Tommy got it from a laughing nurse who had helped with the operation, and who knew the difference between courageous and outrageous. She was a Kilkenny girl with the equipment for sending a man to good dreams. As Ned drifted

into an anesthetized sleep of unknown destination, he reached under her mini-skirt and gave her a firm squeeze in just about the spot where a mermaid's skin would turn into scales. Who says you can't take it with you?

It is also untrue, I learned, that you can never go back. Ned fished for years after that operation, and I went back to the Blackwater twice after leaving Ireland. The fishing had actually improved: maybe just to tease me and maybe because, by then, I had figured out the places where a trout might feed inconspicuously on Black Gnats and Greendrakes and Alders. On those last visits, Ned and I fished nowhere but the Blackwater. We did not know of many good alternatives. Pollution had finished off the Blue-Winged Olives in the Nore and the Greendrakes of Lough Sheelin. In Lough Ennel and the Rye Water, even the trout were dead. Some of the drained streams were producing fish again but were not pretty. The Blackwater appeared to be the last great limestone river in its original binding.

But it could not stay ahead of the dredges much longer. On May 13, 1980, Ned and I stood on O'Daly's Bridge in the little stone coves where Gregory Greendrake and Halford and Francis Francis had stepped aside to get out of the way of carriages. A crane was working in the flat below the bridge, tossing tons of prehistoric gravel and a few pounds of up-to-date trout onto the banks. Ned wished that the people who took decisions could have left one proper trout stream so that his grandchildren

could see what God intended Ireland to be like. For himself, he had no complaints.

"I've seen the best of it," he said, and he meant it. Born June 19, 1910, he had been around when modern cars had made the best of the fishing available. He grew up yearning for the perfect, out-of-reach tackle in the Hardy catalog, and lived to catch hundreds of trout on a Ritz rod, while leaving the heavy old Hardy canes for rough use. Only a lot of modern medicine kept him alive long enough to see technology finish off the Blackwater.

That last May, Ned and I fished a few hundred yards and a few hundred years upstream of the technology. The Blackwater insisted on surrendering trout even to half-heated anglers. This time I kept all the fish, like Ned. A knock on the head seemed better than their alternatives.

On a Wednesday in January, Ned Maguire shot his last woodcock. He could not get far from the car by then, so I suppose that Tommy Corcoran pushed the bird in the right direction. Anyhow, Ned had the makings of more Woodcock and Yellows than he had time to tie. The dredges finally caught up to him on January 2, 1983. His last letter told me that he wouldn't know where to find fishing next season anyhow.