**How *Nomads* came to be made**

In August, 1973 a young Englishman called Chris McCully could be found fly-fishing for white-trout in the Round Pool on Beat 3 of the Gowla river in Connemara. Nearly forty years later, the same Englishman can be found writing about Irish sea-trout – they’re usually called ‘sea-trout’ now, even by the Irish – in his study at home in the north-east of the Netherlands. In many ways, this book is a record of what happened in the context of Irish sea-trout fishing during many of those forty years, and what is happening still.

I never expected to write such a book. Once, perhaps, in the years when I was travelling fairly regularly to Ireland from my home and work in the north of England, I *might* have entertained the idea of contributing a short piece to a book that *might* have been rather like *Nomads of the Tides*. Yet it would only have been a short piece, focussing on just the Connemara white-trout fishings that existed as I knew them in the period between 1973 and the end of the 1980s. Although during those same years I fished for brown trout in different parts of Ireland, my experience of Irish white-trout fishing was limited to Connemara, a part of the country which, like thousands of other visiting anglers, I loved for its space, for the dark froth of peat-stained summer floods, the westerly winds and the sunshine-freaked wave-tops on the lough. I loved it for the company, the friendship that was extended to me and for the fact that, for once, I felt deeply and strangely not so much ‘at home’ but in place.

Towards the end of the 1980s, and certainly through the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century, Connemara white-trout runs were radically and detrimentally affected by the presence, in several Connemara coastal regions, of commercial salmon farms. The salmon farms generated unnaturally large populations of sea-lice, which in turn fastened on descending sea-trout and salmon smolts. If they escaped through the lethal, lice-loaded curtains of the estuary and continued their journey to the north Atlantic, the salmon smolts *might* survive; many of the sea-trout smolts, however, destined to feed in the estuaries and coastal shallows where the farms were sited, did not survive. From all the evidence we have, they were eaten alive by lice.

As the runs of Connemara sea-trout declined at the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, I visited the West less frequently. That was partly a matter of the busy-ness entailed by what was then my university work in the north of England, but it was partly a matter of a great and abiding sadness. For the record, the last of the ‘normal’ (non-lice-affected) years during which I enjoyed a visit to Connemara was in 1985; a visit to Clogher, on the Costello system, in 1996 yielded a mere brace of sea-trout, and although here and there the Connemara sea-trout populations were barely surviving, the fishing was often a shadow of its former self. On the Inver system – the waters of Invermore and Inverbeg – there had truly been catastrophe: fishing had stopped altogether. When I walked the Gowla river in 1996 there were signs tacked to posts planted in the bog: *This Fishery Is Closed As A Conservation Measure*. (Gowla has since re-opened, under new management. The Gowla is explored elsewhere on this website; the Ballynahinch system is explored in the Gazetteer section of the main text.)

In 1996, after talking to Peter Mantle at Delphi and to several others, I wrote two pieces for *Trout and Salmon* which detailed the Connemara and south Mayo sea-trout stock collapses. I corresponded widely at that time about sea-trout and the troubles that
had in certain parts of Britain and Ireland engulfed them. Since a similar sort of environmental catastrophe was unfolding in the coastal waters of the west of Scotland, only on a much larger scale, I wrote to and received replies from several fishery managers and others intimately connected with what was informally called ‘the sea-trout crash’. I wrote to my local MP. I wrote to civil servants in Westminster and civil servants who were responsible for drafting fishery protection policies in Europe. They suggested – simply, one suspects, to fob me off – that I write to the European Commissioner. I wrote to the European Commissioner. About the only person to whom I didn’t write was Santa Claus.

In 1998 I didn’t think I would fish for sea-trout in Ireland ever again.

* 

In the years that followed, life changed very considerably. For various complicated reasons, my fishing during the period 1998-2001 was largely a matter of casting deadbaits for urban pike together with occasional visits to the Yorkshire Dales to fish for brown trout and grayling. Between 2000-2003 I used to commute from what was to become a new base in the Netherlands to work in the north of England, and slowly the default form of fishing became pike fishing in and around Amsterdam and in other Dutch provinces. I caught pike on jerkbaits, plugs, spinners and on streamers fished on fly-rods. Twice or three times each year I’d make visits to England to fish for grayling or to Denmark and Sweden to fish for grayling, pike and sea-trout. Occasionally, too, I returned to Ireland – to Lough Derg or to Leitrim – to fish for pike. Yet if you’d asked me, in 2003, whether I’d ever fish for Irish sea-trout again, my answer would have been ‘Probably not’.

* 

In 2007, quite unexpectedly, I received an email from the editorial team at Trout and Salmon. Would I, the email asked, be interested in making a visit to Connemara to fish for sea-trout? I phoned Sandy Leventon. ‘I thought there weren’t any sea-trout left in Connemara,’ I said. ‘You’re wrong, you know,’ said Sandy. ‘From the reports we’re getting, there are some sea-trout back in the Ballynahinch.’ What about the salmon farm in Bertraghboy Bay?’ I asked. ‘It’s apparently been farming cod for the past three years,’ said Sandy. ‘Fewer lice – and therefore, the sea-trout runs seem to be picking up.’

I phoned the Ballynahinch Castle hotel, where I spoke to the fishery manager, Simon Ashe. Simon confirmed the salmon farm story – it had indeed been farming cod since 2004 – and in addition gave me striking confirmation of the fact that the runs of sea-trout on the Ballynahinch were increasing. ‘I was down on Beat 3 fishing the dry-fly just a couple of evenings ago,’ said Simon. ‘Released around a dozen white-trout – cracking fish to over the pound.’

And so, in 2007, I dusted off the sea-trout rods, took a plane from Amsterdam to Manchester, where I met my old friend Rod Calbrade, and from there flew to Galway, where we picked up a hired Toyota and took the old road – the road of memory and enchantment – west up the shore of the Corrib, west to Peacock’s, and then the turn at Maam Cross; left over the bog, past Peter’s Lake; a right turn to Cashel, to Toomeola;
and then the drive up the Ballynahinch river, where croys built when Ranji owned the fishery in the 1930s are still extant – and still used.

Rod didn’t know at the time that I was driving back into the most profound of my own memories. As I drove past Cashel I was gulping, hard, behind the wheel. I’d deliberately gone a long way round to the Ballynahinch because I wanted to drive again up the coastal road where, over thirty years before, I’d cycled. The journey itself was a kind of haunting in which I was meeting that old ghost, the boy who was once me.

The following day we fished. It was 7th July, 2007. The diary tells me that we were up early (0530). By 0600 I’d caught a finnock of around 10oz. on a little Kingsmill in the Trout Stream lying hard by the Ballynahinch Castle hotel. It was the first Irish sea-trout I’d caught for eleven years. ‘Muscular memory’, the diary says: ‘Mending the line, waking the top dropper.... As I fished, I re-learned my own past.....’

Rod and I were still fishing thirteen hours later – grilse were running along with the sea-trout – and had to be summoned back to the hotel for dinner. After dinner, as I was standing in the hotel porch having a post-prandial cigarette, the maitre d’ joined me and we began to exchange memories and stories. Desmond told me a story about ‘The Best-Dressed Gillie in Connemara’. I was still laughing as I walked back into the hotel, into the wonderful back bar where the fishing ledgers and records are kept. Then I began, somewhat idly, to look through the Lower Ballynahinch fishing records, kept up for many decades. Somehow, the hauntungs, the old stories, the fishings and the new realities were beginning to coalesce in that unbidden darkness which is my imagination and I remember thinking that ‘someone should write all this stuff down’. I never thought, at that time, that the someone would be me.

* *

‘Someone should write this stuff down....’ In 2008, having fished the Ballynahinch, the Cashla and the Erriff the previous year, I was invited again to fish in Ireland, and was once again supported very kindly by Tourism Ireland and Inland Fisheries Ireland. In 2008 we fished the Moy estuary, Carrowmore Lake (in Mayo) and Currane (Kerry). Carrowmore, in particular, yielded a magnificent day’s sea-trout fishing. As I travelled in 2008, and as I’d done the previous year, I took photographs of old records; talked with old memories; jotted down the significant statistics. Later that summer I visited the UK Game Fair and approached Jon Ward-Allen, who at the time had rashly committed the Medlar Press to bringing out a book of mine about pike fishing.

I wanted to tell Jon about the ‘someone should write it down’ Irish sea-trout idea; to tell him about the relevant parts of my own past; to remind him of the sea-trout stock collapse, to say something about management, and new realities, and even about hope. Perhaps, after all, I might be able to play some sort of co-ordinating role in some sort of writing project....

It was a very hot afternoon at the Game Fair. Jon had been meeting and greeting friends and admirers all day long. We stood in a marquee which, like the people inside it, was sweaty and rather unsteady.

I’m hopeless at selling the ideas which lie behind my work. I feel tongue-tied, embarrassed. There in the rancid heat I embarked on a long, over-elaborate explanation of the ‘Irish sea-trout’ idea. Ballynahinch – records – Best-Dressed Gillie – Kingsmill
Moore – estuary sea-trout, history of fishing for.... Somewhere I started to burble. Stock collapse – rehabilitation – colour and form of flies....

‘Yes,’ Jon said.
Just that.
Yes.

No doubt, there in 2008 in a clammy marquee at the Game Fair, Jon just wanted me to go away, but he had, after all, said ‘Yes’. I drafted a book proposal. All the same, I was uncertain. Was the book too ambitious? Could it actually be done? Should it be done? I emailed the proposal to Ken Whelan, whom I’d met and interviewed on my first return visit to Ireland in 2007. Ken, I thought, will know.

Ken’s reply came within twenty minutes, ‘Great idea. Since you’re going ahead with this I’d love to do something on the science....’

I was astonished. Here was one of Ireland’s top fishery scientists offering to contribute....

I wrote back in less time than it’s taking to complete typing this sentence. ‘Why don’t we,’ I asked, ‘work on the thing together?’
‘Yes,’ Ken said.
Just that.
Yes.
with a professional or semi-professional photographer. When constructing feature articles it’s difficult to fish, write, record, make notes and photograph solo, and therefore a photographer almost invariably comes along. I’ve usually worked more than happily with those lens-experts who have come with me on angling trips to Ireland and elsewhere. Ideally, however, for what we were beginning to think of as the Nomads project I needed to travel with someone who was a personal friend, someone with experience of photography and design, someone who had the relevant free time (sufficient to make repeated trips to Ireland during the course of a short sea-trout season) – and someone, perhaps, for whom Irish sea-trout fishing, in all its variety, would be something new. Fresh eyes, after all, sometimes reveal so much more than accustomed glances.

I wrote to James Sadler. ‘Bit of a long shot,’ I wrote, ‘but if by any chance....’
‘Yes,’ James said.
Just that.
Yes.

James Sadler, regretting saying ‘Yes’
And so Nomads was born. Throughout 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 I made repeated visits to those parts of Ireland where sea-trout run...or to where they are merely alleged to run. Sometimes I fished with Mark Corps, Markus Müller, Lindsey Clarke and Gardiner Mitchell – and with others, like Keven Crowley, David Byrne and Mike Hennessey – as we worked on putting together feature articles for Trout and Salmon. Often I travelled on my own; at other, less frequent times with Ken or James. (The three of us rarely coincided in the same place at the same time, though we fished together in the same boat on a memorable day on Lough Derriana, high in the Kerry mountains, in September 2009.) Though we may disagree, and sometimes disagree radically, about certain things, and even about some fundamental things, we have never had a difficult word. The entire Nomads project has been, and has become ever more of, a delight. We’ve met and made enduring friends with some splendid individuals and have almost invariably enjoyed the warmest of hospitality. We’ve fished for sea-trout in freezing temperatures, with snow lying on the Mayo mountains, and we’ve fished for them in the first, eccentric gusts of early autumnal leaf-fall. We’ve fished with freeled natural sandeels, with spoons and spinners, and (usually) with the fly. We’ve fished on blindingly white sand-strands, from slowly-drifting boats and under the mantle of darkness. We’ve traversed Ireland – from Ballyness in the north of Donegal to the southerly reaches of Cork and Kerry, from Renvyle in the remote West to Ballsbridge in the urban East. We’ve travelled and fished in what are some of the loveliest places on earth – and in some places which have no conventional loveliness at all.

The structure of my own travels and fishing was as follows, proceeding from an uncertain beginning through more time-consuming and radical work during the period 2009-2012:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. trips</th>
<th>Waters fished</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007 (1)</td>
<td>Lower Ballynahinch, Cashla, Burrishoole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 (1)</td>
<td>Gweebarra, Moy, Erne, Carrowmore, Currane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 (3)</td>
<td>Gweebarra, Ballyness, Lough Beagh, Eske; Bandon; Currane and its system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 (5)</td>
<td>Erne estuary; Strangford (two visits), Dundrum estuary; Kylemore, Delphi, Ballisadare, Owenduff, Owenmore (Mayo – two visits), Glenamoy; various other waters in Mayo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 (4)</td>
<td>Bandon, Ilen, Argideen; Nore, Slaney and Boro, Avoca, Vartry, Dargle, Dodder, Boyne (two visits), Castle Gorton, Owenmore (Kerry), Feale, Currane; various small streams on the East coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 (3)</td>
<td>Carlingford, Strangford, Antrim rivers, Foyle system, Lackagh estuary/Lough, Crana. Lough Beagh; Beltra, Tawnyard, Inagh, Screebe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ken asked me in 2011 what sort of mileage I’d covered while working on Nomads during the previous five years. I’d never thought about it, but prompted by Ken’s question, and purely out of interest, I worked out a rough estimate of mileages. Each journey I’d made proceeded from my home in the north-east of the Netherlands to Amsterdam, where occasionally I’d spend the night in an airport hotel; next there were the flight distances; and then the driving distances, which occasionally (as in 2009 and 2010) took me either the length or breadth of Ireland. Along with the mileages, I also worked out how many cars I’d hired, how many trains I’d caught, and how many hotels or guest houses I’d stayed in. The results – which I shall give (a) in case anyone ever feels touched enough to do likewise and (b) as a rough indication of how much background work goes into a book of this kind – are as follows:

**Nomads infrastructure, 2007-2012 (McCully totals only)**

- Total number of trips: 17
- Air miles covered (34 separate flights): 24,440
- Train journeys taken: 58
- Driving mileages (approx.): 7,250
- Cars hired: 18
- Hotels/other accommodation stayed in: 38
- Emails exchanged: 1236
- Blog entries written for Nomads website: 132
- Feature articles written 2007-12: 26
- Presentations given: 3

These activities do not include the mileages undertaken by Ken or James. Were we to add them (and James has on occasion flown from Canada to work on this project) then of
course the totals would radically increase. It’s perhaps worth noting here that the circumference of the earth is roughly 24,000 miles.

As we travelled, read, talked and fished, the work became in many ways a tribute – to the way in which many people have looked after the runs of Irish sea-trout and continue to monitor them even in these times of less-than-abundance; to individuals who helped us on our way and made our journeys easier and more interesting; to angling clubs and organisations within Ireland; to fishery owners, estate managers and hoteliers; to the staff without whom neither the fishery, estate nor hotel would work at all; to writers, angling instructors and photographers; to those who wrote to us and sent images and memories and to those who so freely shared aspects of their own pasts with us; to those who supported our travels and to those who published my sea-trout-related pieces – particularly the editorial team at *Trout and Salmon*. It was my job, or part of it, to contain the generous past within the structures of the present and to try and ensure that what we committed to print and to film would be a true record. And if I may speak plainly, working on and writing up *Nomads* – a six-year task – was a job that was far too big for me and was occasionally too big for the reach of my wallet, but out of that same sense of tribute, and certainly out of abiding gratitude, I’ve done my best.

*Drafting the text exposed one problem it’s proper to address here. Although three of us have worked on this book, much of the drafting fell to me and many of the trips reported in the Gazetteer were undertaken on my own. That had the consequence that *Nomads* is generally written in the first person singular. When I spoke with Ken about this, we agreed to leave the text as it was: writing in the first person plural – ‘we’ – makes almost any work sound as if it’s been written by a committee and we preferred to keep the immediacy of first-handedness wherever we could. That said, Ken has edited every word of my own work, just as I have audited his every word. Where we felt we had something unique to say (as in Ken’s section on the ‘Lives of the white-trout’ in section IV of the book’s text) then that’s attributed by name to the original author. Throughout, I was merely a sort of co-ordinator, equivalent to what in scientific circles is called the ‘lead author’ or ‘corresponding author’ of a particular piece of work. In the making of this text and its images, I’ve been at all times hugely supported by both Ken and James – the thousand or so emails we’ve exchanged testify to that – and at moments of difficulty or doubt they’ve invariably offered practical and helpful advice. *Nomads*, therefore, has been a truly collaborative effort.

Finally here.... It’s odd to think that twelve years ago I had the sense that my own sea-trout fishing in Ireland was finished. I can’t speak for Ken or James in this, but I shall say, for myself and the record, that during the making of *Nomads* I’ve usually had the time of my angling life.

Chris McCully

September 2013
Journey’s end, Groningen railway station, August 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2012