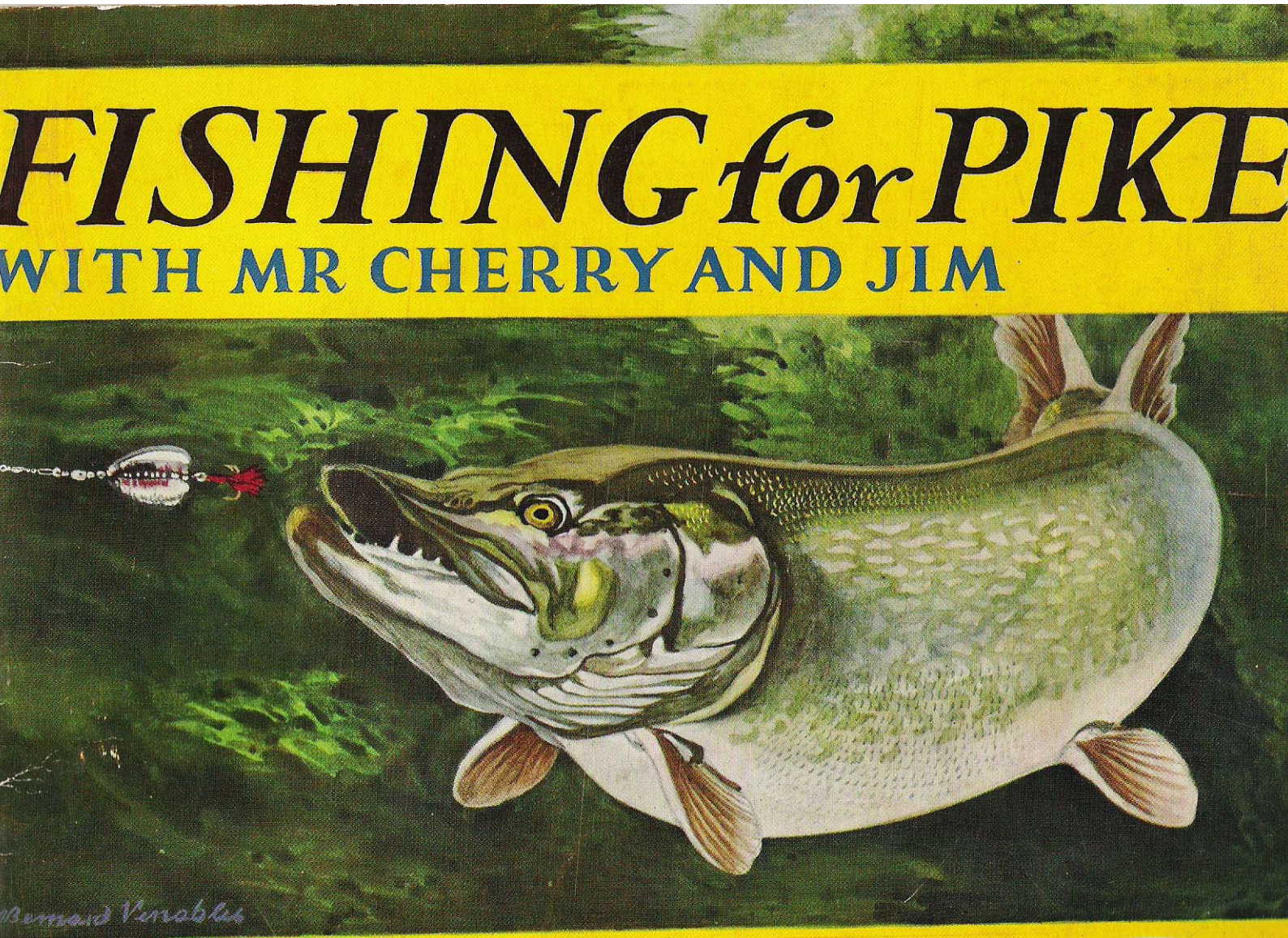
The following article is a Chapter from the “Fishing for Pike” booklet, published by the Angling Times Limited in the 1960s.

Lough Carra features in this chapter.

Thanks to Mr Noel Quigley for bringing this article to our attention. January 2012

FISHING for PIKE

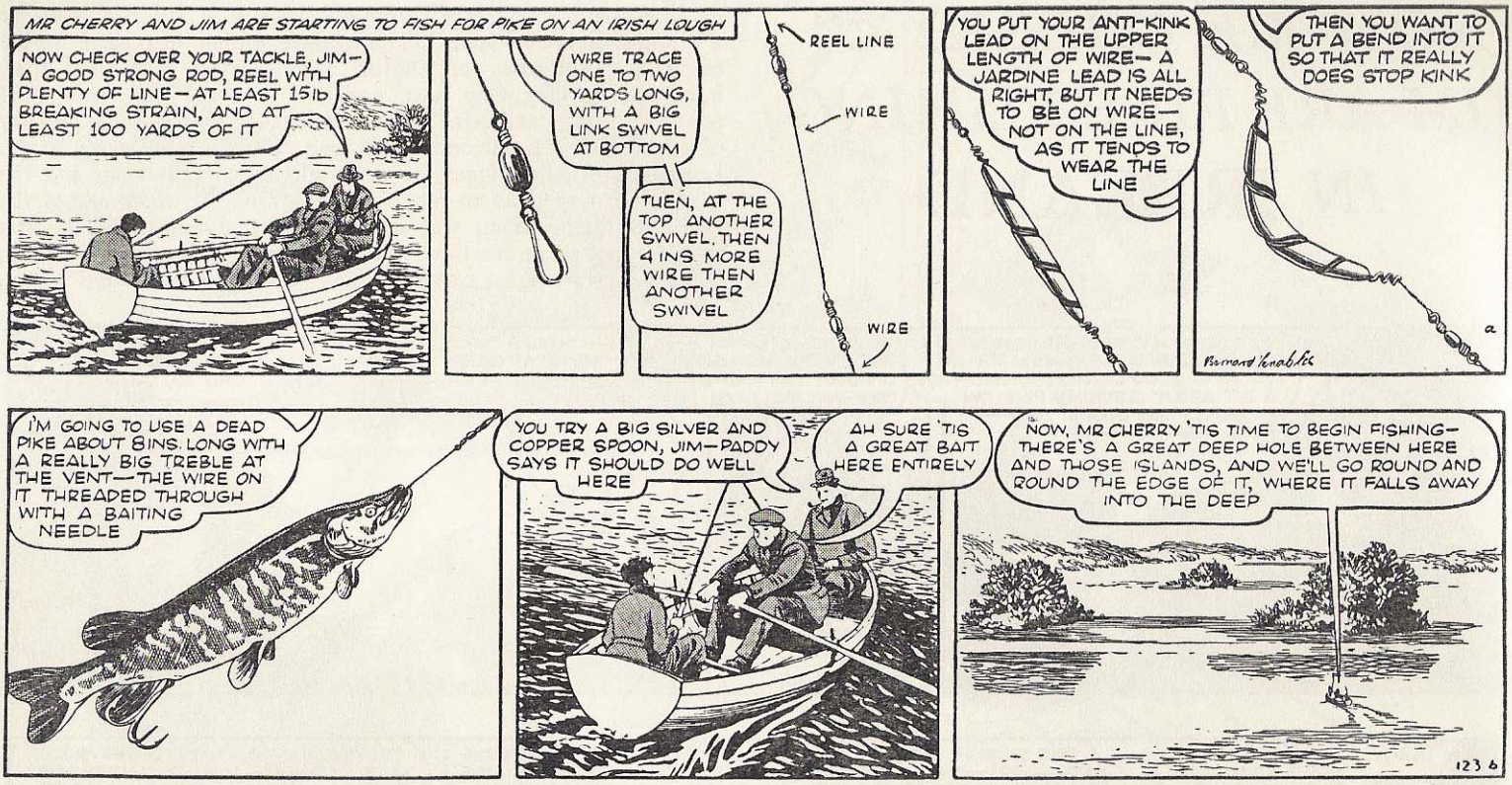
WITH MR CHERRY AND JIM



BERNARD VENABLES

NOW MR CHERRY & JIM ARE PIKE FISHING IN IRELAND

A DIFFERENT PIKE FISHING WORLD INDEED IT IS THAT MR. CHERRY and Jim go to now. Till now their fishing has been in the comparative intimacy of English waters—rivers and lakes that, however big they may have appeared to Jim, are mere small ponds by Irish standards. "A nice little lake" the Irishman will say of a lake that is a mile and a half long. There the lakes are larger. Lough Corrib, the biggest of them all, is 25 miles long, and the islands on it are said to number 365—"One for every day of the year" as the boatman will sometimes say. Lough Mask is little smaller, and there are those great and lovely lakes, Lough Derg, Lough Derravaragh, Lough Ennel, Lough Ree, Lough Conn,

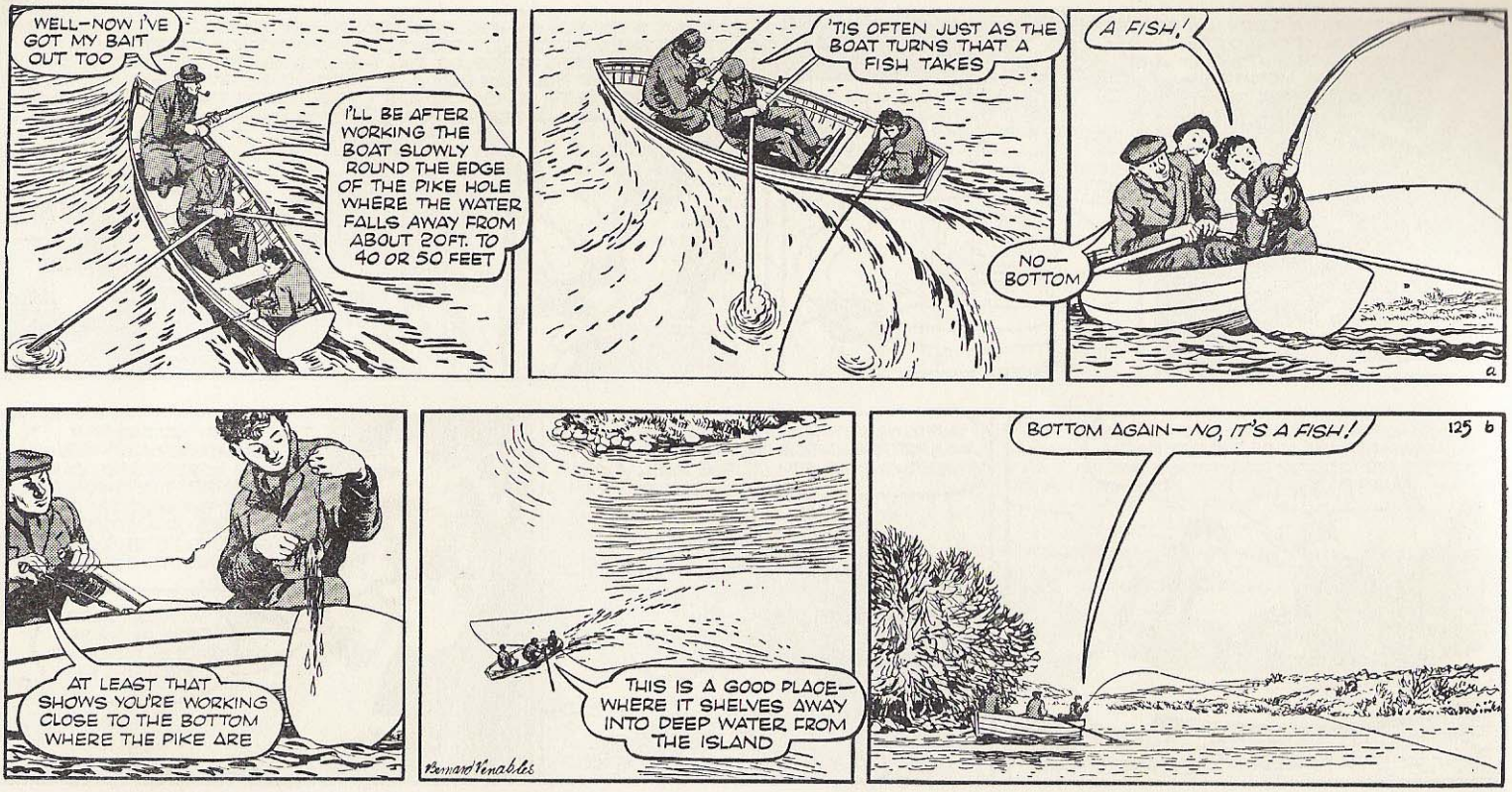


Lough Key, Lough Arrow, Lough Gowna, Lough Ramor, and in Northern Ireland, great Lough Erne itself. There are many more as well, and innumerable "little" lakes of from, say, five to a 100 acres, that in so richly watered a country as Ireland have been hardly considered, and many of them have known never the cast of a line upon them. All these are beautiful, lonely, deeply enticing lakes, mostly clear and deep and many of them limestone waters—and limestone means that fish grow bigger than in other less fertile waters. They are rocky lakes, boulder strewn at their margins and set all over with little islands, and the birds you will see on them will often draw your eyes from your fishing—the snowy clouds of whooper swans, shy birds, unlike their aggressive cousins the mute swans, all sorts of wild duck, cormorants, curlews, and many others. The reedy melancholy beautiful fluting of the curlew is a sound inseparable from this Irish fishing. All the time it is in your ears as you fish, haunting the soft air.

And, you may ask, is this lake that Mr. Cherry and Jim now fish just a generalisation of many Irish lakes, or is it based on a particular one, and the answer is that it is the latter. It is based upon Lough Carra, lonely, lovely Lough Carra that lies close to Ballinrobe in Co. Mayo in the west of Ireland. It has a peculiarity of its own, this wide

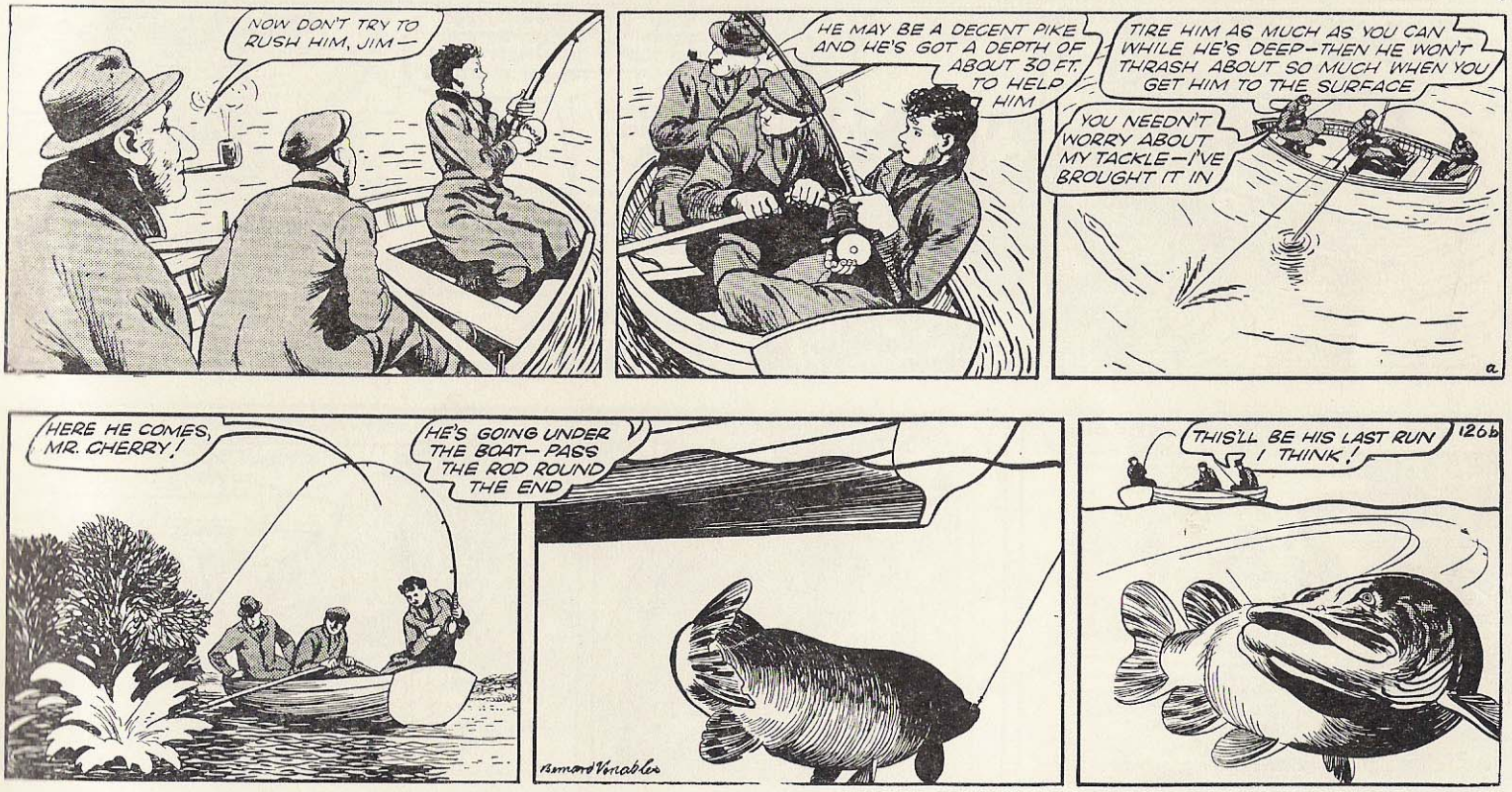
quiet beautiful sheet. It is forever green; its water is a soft almost milky green though it is as clear as water could ever be. It derives its colour, so it is said, from the whiteness of its bottom, clearly to be seen in all the shallower water. There it lies in the wide low empty landscape pocked with the tumble of the white and pale blue-grey limestone, the rock and the close sweet turf mingled to the eye's limit except to the west, where a range of mountains stops the view. Though a typical Irish lake, this one, it has a special atmosphere of its own.

As you will guess, to the angler coming from England these great sheets present an enigma, a problem that may seem at first to defy solution. Where, in all this huge area of water, are fish to be found? There is the water before you, a great quiet ruffling sheet stretching away into remote and hazy distances, so that you are defeated by its geography. Where *should* you start, *how* begin to set yourself to the penetration of its mystery? But, of course, these waters yield to analysis as much as any other smaller water, and the basis of that is the underwater conformation. There are wide shallows where the reeds grow and silt has collected, and in the water—eight feet to 20 feet deep perhaps—there are great populations of pike and perch and rudd and bream. Then, beyond the shallows the bottom falls away to the depths that vary from 20 or 30 feet down to profound



depths of 80 feet and even greater depths. Your coarse fishing—for perch, rudd, bream—will be on the shallows in the reedy bays that are to be found all round the lakes, but for your pike fishing it is better to go afloat. All parts of the lakes are indeed better fished from a boat, though some swims are within reach of the shore, but it is never really practical to fish for pike other than from a boat, and that is indeed true of all these great Irish lakes, Corrib, Conn, Mask, and all the rest.

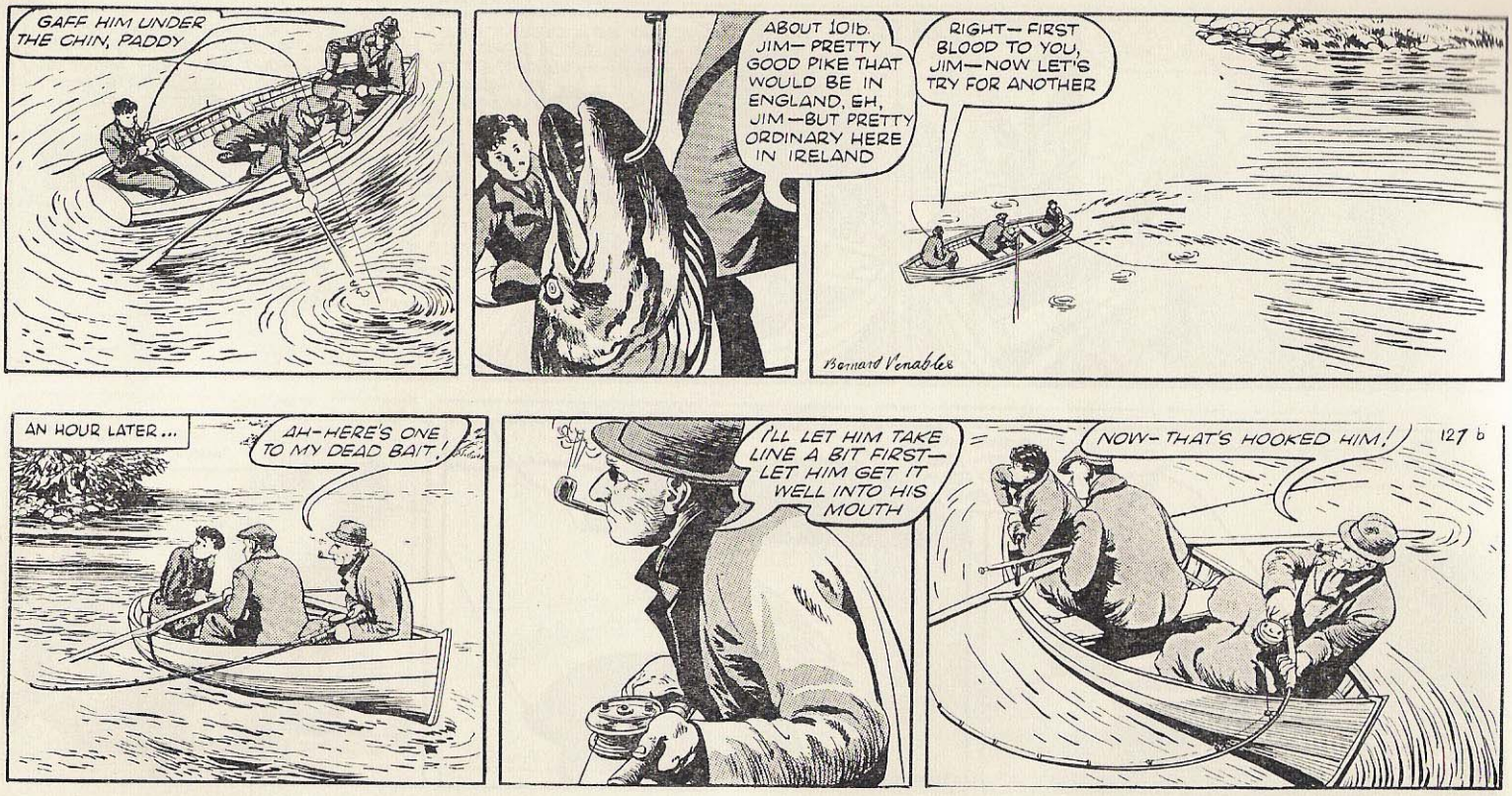
In milder weather pike are to be found in the shallow bays, but when the weather grows colder they go to deeper places. Your Irish angler indeed regards pike fishing as something that belongs to summer and September. To fish for pike after that time he says, is not worth the time it takes; and to an extent he is right. If pike are to be found freely, then it is till the end of September you should fish for them. If later months should be very mild, then still you could expect to find the pike in water up to 20 feet deep. But, ordinarily, they go to the deeper water and it may be a severe difficulty to find them—there is so much deep water, of such varying depth. How deeply they retire must be a matter of the degree of cold, and there is reason to suppose that in the coldest weather they descend to the very deep levels. When they do so, even if you *do* get your bait down to them, it is unlikely that they will take it



for they will be torpid and disinterested in feeding. Of all the months perhaps September could be best.

But in the ordinary run of winter weather some pike may be found and taken by trying for them in what might be called the middle depths, and particularly at those places where the level changes, where the bottom falls away. For that, of course, the local knowledge of the boatman is essential. He knows where the hidden shelves of rock are, where the sudden holes are, the likely places in the vicinity of islands, the shoals that come up out of the great depths to near the surface. And he knows how a bait worked over these places with frequent turns so that the bait lurches and sinks and rises again will often bring a pike. It is the sudden lurch and slide of the bait that often works.

The great area of Irish lakes, the so extensive amount of water to be fished, dictates to a large extent the methods of fishing. Many an English angler has gone to Ireland convinced that his methods born of the smaller English waters will work better than those the Irishman uses for his great waters; but, usually, he has had to admit that his methods belong to a more intimate sort of fishing than now faces him. The universal method of the Irish angler is trolling, trailing a bait behind a very slowly moving boat; and indeed, only so can you fish in a practical way. There may be occasions, as Mr.



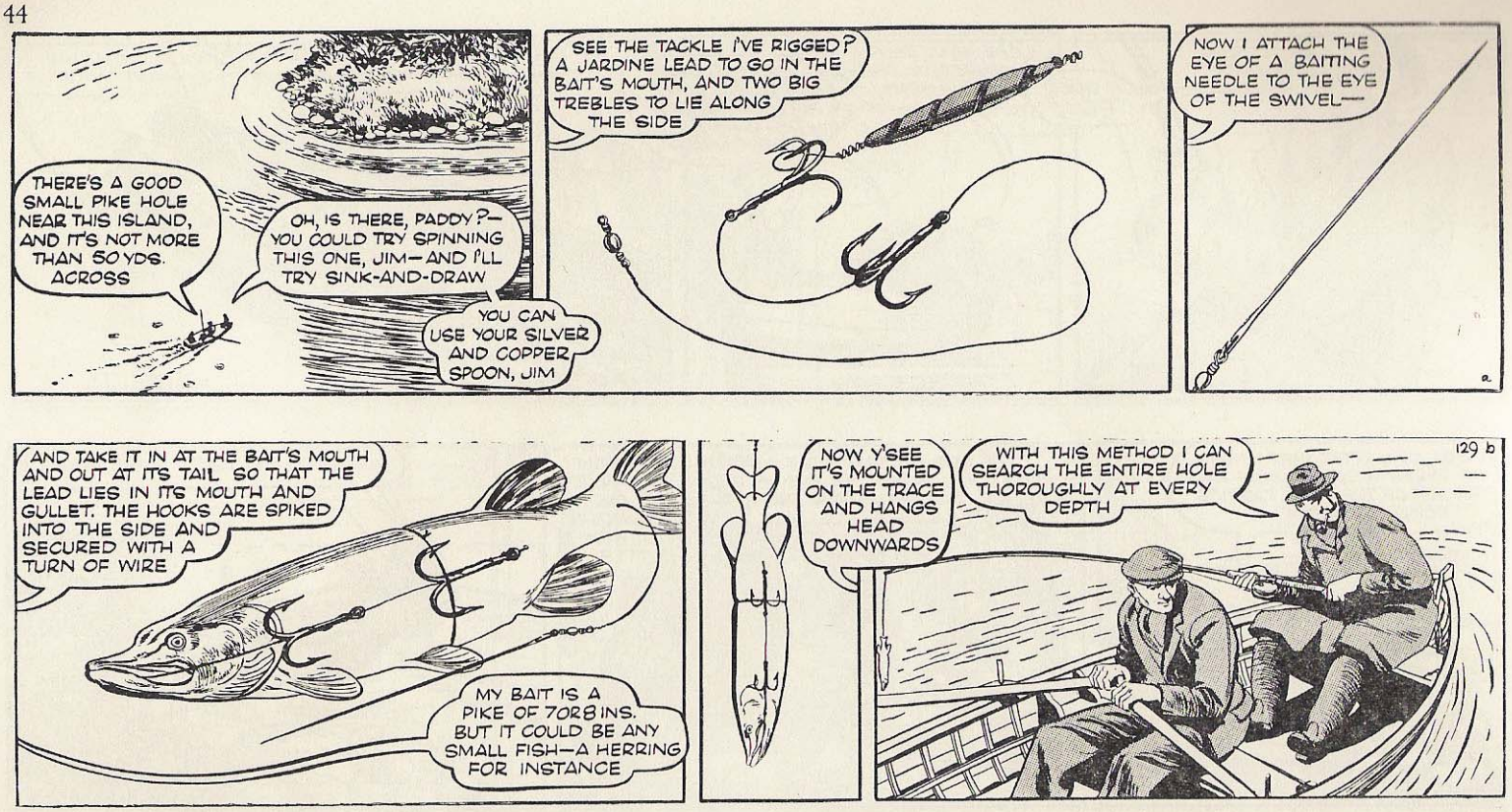
Cherry shows Jim, when a reversion to spinning or sink-and-draw is good tactics—when in the great expanse of water you have, by observation or what is told to you by the boatman, isolated one piece of water that may be treated, as it were, individually. But, generally, you can only search the many acres of water before you by trolling. Not to do so would be to deny yourself the greater part of your opportunity. You can waste a lot of time spinning in the wrong place, and the right place is not easy to find.

But when so much has been accepted, it has to be admitted that the ordinary, conventional form of trolling can be very dull until a fish is hooked. It demands nothing of the skill of the angler and depends entirely upon the knowledge and skill of the boatman—and what good angler could be content with that? However good the promise of a really good pike may be, the angler must fish for himself. Fortunately not only may trolling be made more interesting, but in making it so it can be made more effective, can increase the chance of finding a pike. As trolling is ordinarily used on the great lakes, a wooden peg is set in the gunwale of the boat and the rod rested against it so that it stands out from the boat at an angle. It is common practice to have one rod out each side of the boat, with the baits trailing some forty to fifty yards behind. Then, by varied speed of rowing, and by carefully judged turns of the boat,

the boatman works the baits as his knowledge of the water tells him they should be worked. It is the boatman's skill and knowledge which is important.

If though the angler holds his rod, he can work with and amplify all the good work that is done by the boat. He can feel the working of his bait and respond to all changes of circumstances. The boatman will tell him that the boat is passing over a shelf of rock and that then the bottom falls away in a long steep slope. The angler then can let line run away slowly, against the sensitive pressure of his finger on the reel, so that his bait goes rolling and flickering and working all down the face of the slope. And then, if a pike should take, as it well might in such a situation, he can react at once. Then again the boatman may say that now the water is shallowing, banking up a face of rock, and the angler can, by degrees, shorten his line so that he avoids snagging on the bottom and makes the bait work enticingly all the way up the slope. He can, through his hands, 'see' the bait all the time, using his fisherman's sense to make it work well. His skill, as well as the boatman's, now becomes important.

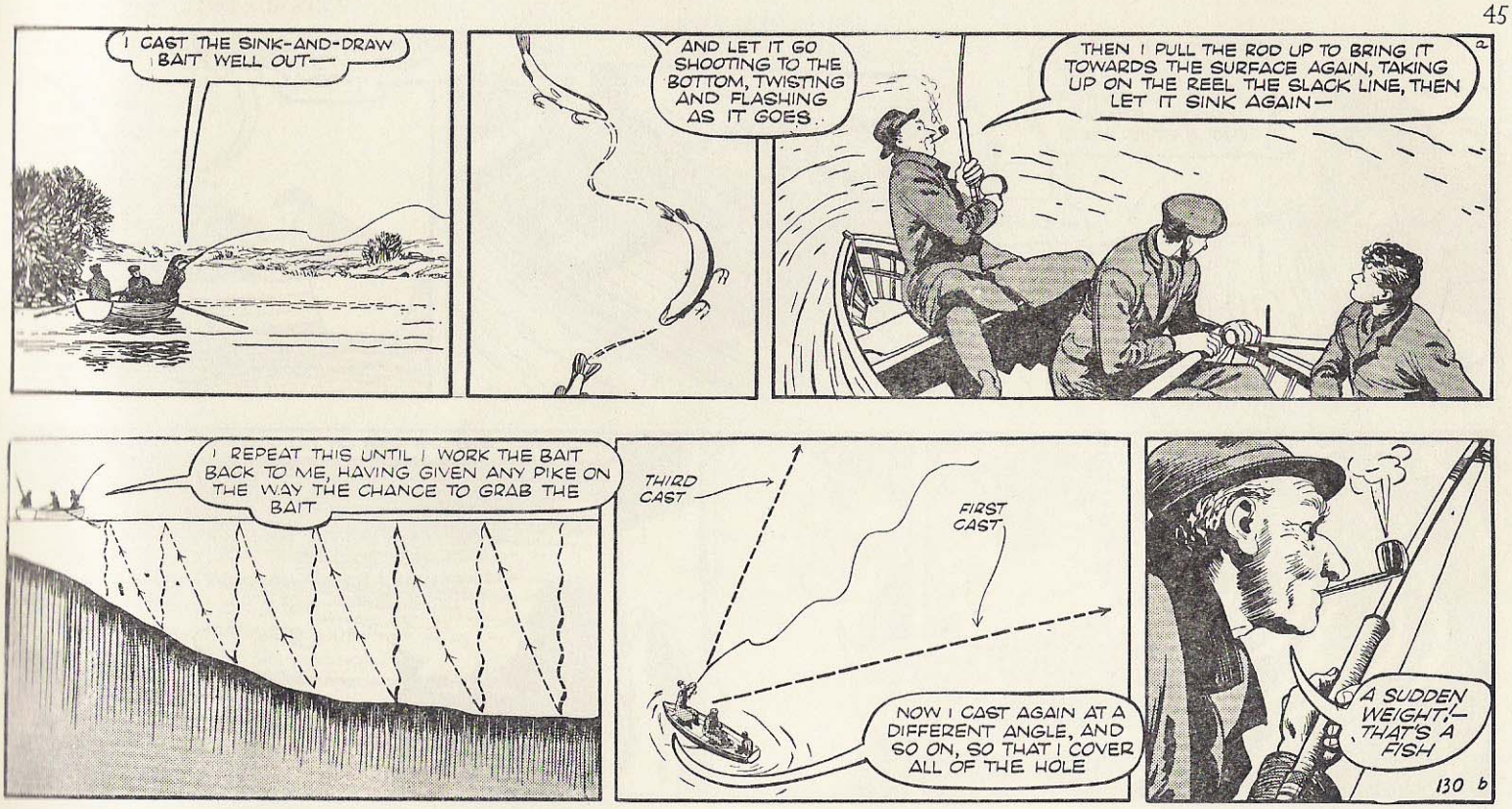
Sometimes, it may be, he will fish by himself, rowing very slowly; and then he must prop his rod against the wooden pin in the gunwale and do his fishing entirely by his manipulation of the boat.



So he sets his rod in place, out at an angle from the side of the boat, draws a loop of line between the reel and the butt ring, and on that puts a piece of stone to hold it down. This is his means of receiving a signal of the attentions of a pike. When a pike takes the line will leap from beneath the stone, and he can take appropriate action. For this, of course, it is essential that he shall at once have both hands free, not be encumbered by looking after the oars, and for that most boats that are to be had on Irish lakes have a device, one which could do equally well on English waters.

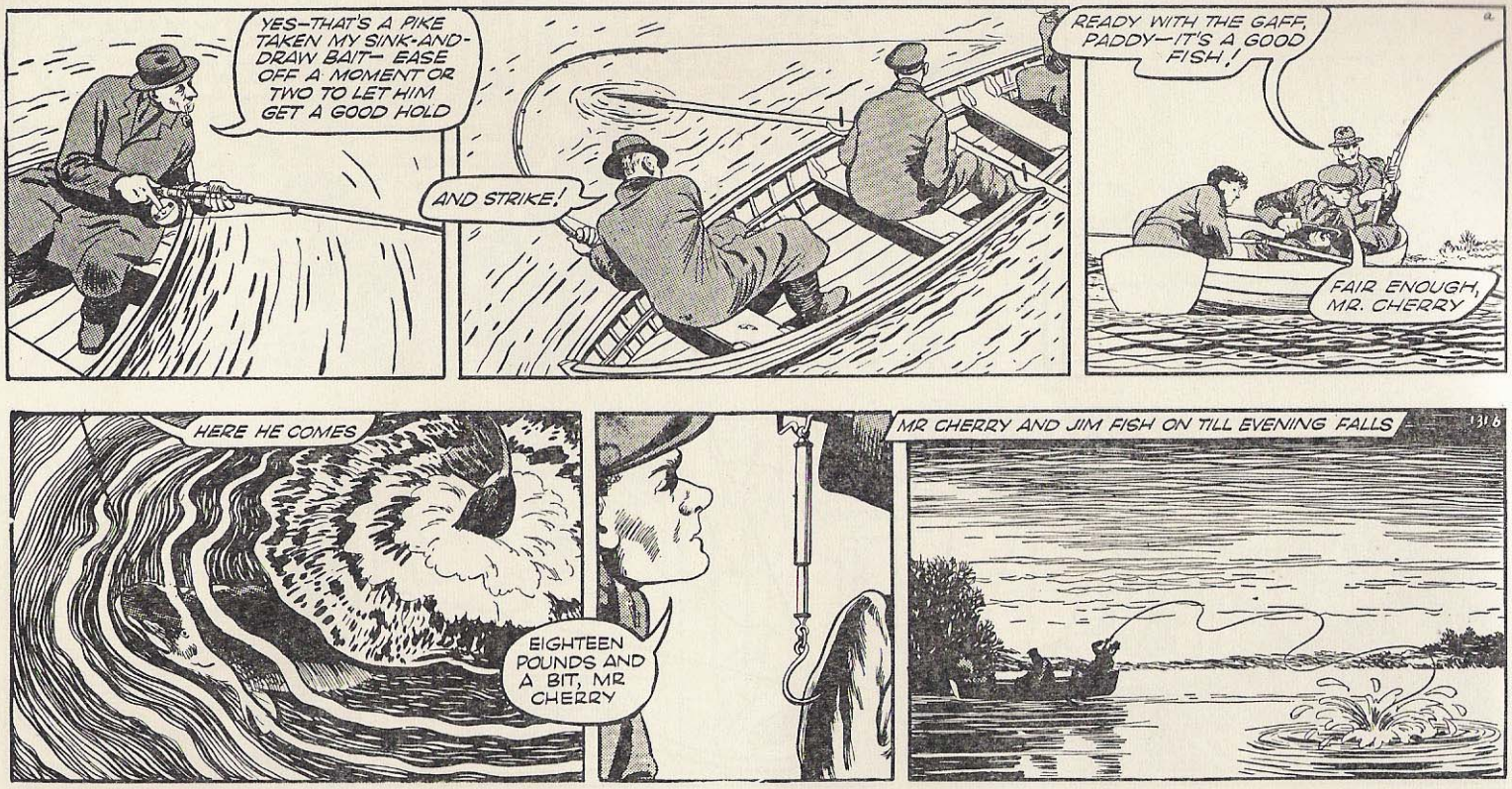
Rowlocks are not used, but thole pins. Wooden or metal pins stand up from the gunwale where otherwise there would be rowlocks. The oars have a widening at the part where they go over the gunwales, and up through this widening there is a hole, and the oar is dropped on to the thole pin, the pin going up through the hole. So, when a pike takes, the hands can be taken from the oars instantly with no fear that the oars will come adrift, and the whole attention given to striking and playing the pike. There is no fear of losing one or both the oars.

You will notice that Mr. Cherry uses a large bait, a small pike, and you can indeed hardly use too big a bait. Those great Irish pike, often lying in deep water, need a big bait. Even the silver and copper spoons so popular with the Irish fishermen, are seldom less



than three inches long, and one twice that length would probably be better. In spinning the size of your bait is limited by the maximum weight that your rod will cast, but in trolling there is no such limitation because you have no more to do than drop your bait over the side. If you can come by them, small pike are very good baits for big pike, and so indeed are herrings or any other long silvery fish. These big baits must be worked slowly, and your Irish boatman knows this well; he will usually work the boat with cunning, just keeping it moving, turning it frequently so that the bait lurches and drops, and it is often at such moments that a pike will take. If you are by yourself in the boat, remember this, just paddle the boat gently along—and, if you are fishing shallower water, have a shorter line out, 30 yards perhaps, so that the bait may not snag the bottom. When you move on to deeper water you can ease off more line to sink the bait appropriately. Never become dull and mechanical in your working of the bait.

But be cautious about solitary expeditions. Big winds can rise suddenly on the great lakes, and you, unaccustomed to them, may be in danger. Seek advice as to the weather to be expected and as to which are likely to be the more sheltered parts of the lake if a wind should arise. If you should be caught by a wind, and decide to run for an island, there to land, do *not* run up to it on the wind-



ward side. The wind will crash you on the jagged rocks with which the islands are invariably margined, probably stave in the planks, and you will be in trouble. When you approach the island with the wind behind you, work round to the side away from the wind, and there land. Having done so, be sure the boat is well pulled up and secured. The wind's agitation of the surface can easily drift the boat away to leave you marooned, and Irish lakes are large and lonely. You might be there a long time.

That is the cautionary side of this fishing, and it should not suggest to you that it is a highly hazardous occupation—it needs ordinary care and a recognition that big sheets of water *can* be dangerous if not treated with respect. Only people ignorant of their ways are casual about them. Sensible people, with a little caution, should have no trouble.

But, with these precautions, days spent on Irish lakes, long, lost, airy days with their constant chance of epic sport, are a memorable and lovely experience. What better meal could there be than that Mr. Cherry and Jim have, among the mossy lichened trees of an island, sitting on rocks, drinking the steaming full-flavoured tea brewed in the old black kettle from the pure lake water? Jim will remember that all his life. The smell of a wood fire will transport him instantly back to that small island.

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