



Mallard flying over Lough Carra.

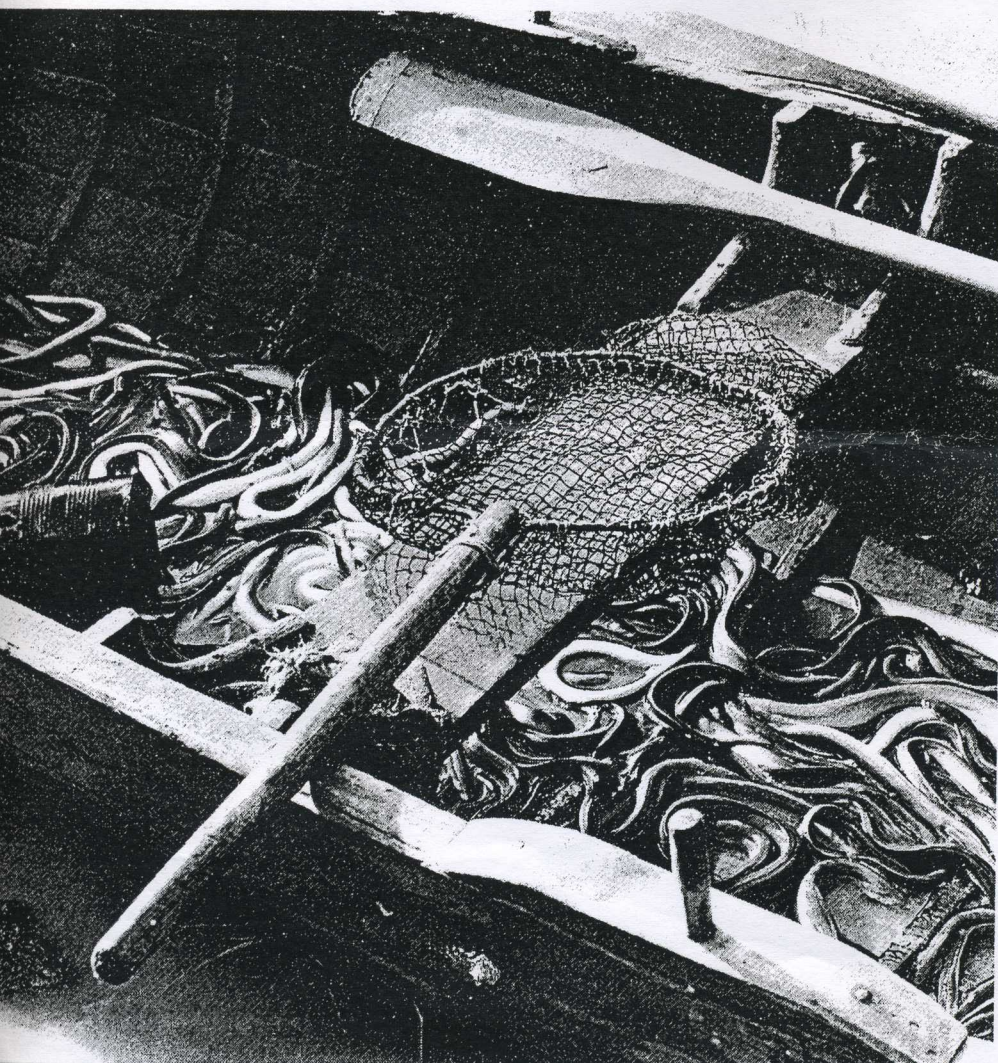


The Lough from Castle Bourke.

The Fair Maid of Carra

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It was a monk, Brother Daly, fishing on Lough Carra, who told us that its Gaelic name, when translated, meant "The Fair Maid of Carra." We soon found ourselves sharing his enthusiasm for this most beautiful water and agreed that its Gaelic name was indeed apt.

The lough is quite shallow, lying in a limestone bed, which gives the water its astonishingly brilliant green and white reflections in the sunshine. In some areas where the mud was exposed, particularly near Killkieran, it was so white that it reminded us irresistibly of the drying salt pans of the Camargue, especially when the black Aberdeen Angus cattle were grazing in the *phragmites* reed beds, just as the black fighting bulls do on the Camargue!

We were fortunate in being able to accompany Brian Stronach and Tommy Flanelly on their weekly duck count on our arrival—a five-hour, 24-mile trip.

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Although the country around the Lough is flat—good grazing for the Galway sheep—it is dominated away to the west beyond Lough Mask by the Partrey Mountains, where the Irish red grouse can be found, and the much wilder peaks of Joyce Country in Connemara. Far to the north are the mountains of Sligo and north Mayo.

The lough is alkaline, so the waterplants grow well, as do the local brown trout with their bright silvery bellies. A profuse growth of stonewort is, no doubt, what brings the large flocks of pochard in winter, while the extensive beds of true bulrushes must provide plenty of seeds for dabbling duck, as do the alders and silver birches on the islands and lining much of the shore. Another predominant tree is the hazel—and the medium-sized coppices are beloved by the woodcock.

The reed that surprised me most of all was the Norfolk reed—*phragmites*. This grows in two ways—first, as single large stalks well spaced out in water from 4-5 feet deep, so that each stalk must be up to 9-10 feet tall with several feet of open water around each plant. This gives a most unusual and lovely effect.

The second way in which the *phragmites* grows is as a thick reed-bed in the shallow bays. At home, we tend to look upon this reed with some suspicion, for it can so quickly overgrow and ruin a marsh. On Lough Carra the position is quite the reverse, for in late summer and autumn it provides the main cover for all the broods of duck, for moulting adults and for fully flying adults and young, until it dies back in late autumn.

As we nosed our way through the reed-beds we soon saw well-grown broods of tufted duck and mergansers swimming away and large parties of mallard were jumping in front of us and flying off.

No doubt many remained and these early season duck counts are probably well down on the true figure. To overcome this Brian hopes soon to experiment with a radar scanner.

Many of the tufted duck had already gone—probably to join an important and as yet unknown autumn assembly water, which may be on Lough Corrib. Ringing and wing tabs will probably solve this in due course.

Water-rails were squealing in the reed-beds, many of the breeding common gulls were still about and two young dusky redshank, newly arrived from northern Scandinavia, flew over southwards.

Many of the islands have names—"The Twins" (which indeed they are, one with its feral goats), Castle Island, its ruined castle dating back to the days of clan warfare and now the nesting site of a pair of merlins, and so on.

Just north of the lough there is the most beautifully restored Abbey of Ballintubber, founded in 1216 and, therefore, 29 years older than Westminster Abbey. It was sacked by Cromwell in 1653. Nearby are more ruins—this time of Castle Bourke, with a fine Norman style keep, in which we found two kestrels' nests and a fine adult female sparrowhawk dashed past us.

Yet another ruined castle—Castle Carra itself—is also sited by the northern shore



In places Lough Carra resembles The Camargue.



An open bed of Common Reed.



Duck rising from the reed-beds.

where he had successfully stalked a fine feral goat as it stood on the very top of the ruins.

Two eel-catchers were camped close by us, catching their eels on night lines baited with worms. They would return each morning with a mass of eels slithering about in the bottom of their boat. The biggest eels weighed about 1½ lb and they got 4/- per pound for ultimate sale in Billingsgate at 6/- a pound. On a good day they can catch 12-14 stones of eels.

Our few days on the lough went all too quickly, boating, fishing and photographing, going round the duck traps in which some 20 mallard a day were being caught and ringed. Back now, caught up again in the ghastly rat-race of south-east England, the wonderful hospitality received in the glorious surroundings of Lough Carra makes us wonder whether, after all, we have got the priorities of life the right way round. Somehow I don't think it very much.