

The River Shannon Fishery

In describing the Shannon it would be as well, first, to take its course and, secondly, to try and give some idea of the fishing and the altered conditions of the river since the great power scheme was completed in 1929.

The Shannon runs approximately from North to South of Ireland, and commences its southern journey through Carrick-on-Shannon and then through Lough Boderg into Lough Ree. At the southern end of Lough Ree, the river starts again and flows by Athlone into Lough Derg at Portumna.

At the south end of Lough Derg we find Killaloe. Before 1930, the river commenced again and had an uninterrupted journey to the sea. Now, owing to the Shannon power scheme, Lough Derg has been extended for some four miles until you come to the great Dam and head works at Parteen Villa, which is about a mile above O'Brien's Bridge. Six miles below this is Castleconnell.

If you take the total length of the river and the lakes through which it flows, you will find that it is about 250 miles. It has an enormous drainage area of about 4500 square miles as compared with the drainage area of the River Tay in Scotland, which is 2500 square miles.

As a great salmon river, it is now limited to a few miles below Castleconnell. The great Dam at Parteen Villa controls the amount of water which is allowed to go down the river and the canal which leads to the power-house.

by John Rennie

Here we have the salmon pass, most carefully and well designed with all the latest ideas.

There are two bailiffs, watching day and night and, as far as possible, counting the salmon ascending.

It was noted that some of the fish took only fifteen minutes to ascend the thirty five feet.

I spent two Sundays one year at the fish pass, and it was most amusing to watch the fish going up the spiral staircase. I think about 140 went on one of the days. The pass has been made so easy for them, that it requires no exertion on their part. I saw great fellows up to thirty pounds and they took very little notice, although we were only a few feet away. I also saw large trout up to five and six pounds ascending, but not nearly so quickly as the salmon.

From the Dam to Castleconnell, the river flows in a deep and sluggish course, so that it is from Castleconnell down that the interest begins from the salmon-fishers point of view.

The River Shannon has been and still is most dreadfully over-netted, otherwise there would be no river to compare with it. There are weirs, stake nets, seine nets, drift nets, laxweir cribs, snap nets. No wonder so few fish ever get up the Shannon.

Looking up old records I find that away

back in 1865, the beat known as Doonass at Castleconnell killed 425 salmon. In the year 1866, 671 salmon and grilse. After that year the records begin to drop away, and from 1889 to 1892 the average catch on Doonass is about 35 salmon up to the end of May and in 1899, only 19 fish were caught.

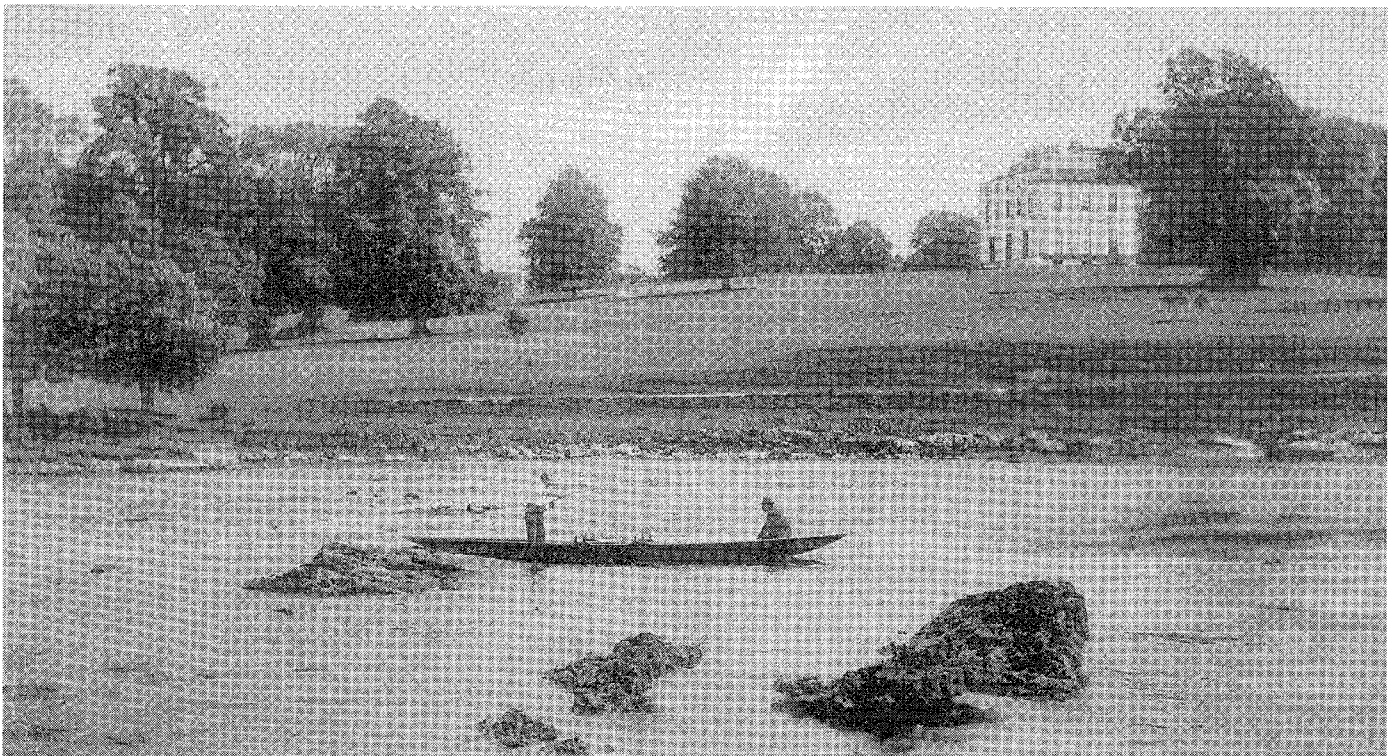
In the 'seventies, 150 to 200 grilse would be caught on this beat in the season. Now there are practically no grilse. Likewise, we find the same thing on other well-known beats. The 'Hermitage' and 'Prospect' were rented by Mr. Cripps, for which he paid £500 per annum. In 1899, we find him writing to the commissioners to say that the fishing had fallen off so much, owing to excessive netting, that he would not pay 500 shillings for the renewal of his lease. It is interesting to look back on these records and to find that the fishing has improved during the past ten years.

One hears a great deal about the 'glorious past' from the boatmen, but you have to go back a very long way to find these wonderful catches.

1928 was a very good year and there were plenty of fish in the water. There is a report that in 1930, a large number of grilse came up in July.

Having now got down to Castleconnell, you must picture to yourself a great, broad, rugged river, tumbling through locks and opening out into great pools.

There may be larger rivers, but the Shannon at Castleconnell is the most sporting bit of River I know.



Boatman and angler at Castleconnell, the house Hermitage behind, 1908.

Limerick Museum.



Coach outside Enright's fishing rod and tackle shop, Castleconnell, 1905.

Limerick Museum.

I remember, after I had been broken or cut by two or three fish, my boatman said, 'But you see, your honour, they are built for speed and power,' and so they are.

Not long ago, I was fishing with a man from New Zealand, at Castleconnell, and he told me many stories of the wonderful fishing in that country and what the fish could do.

I said to him, 'Wait until you get hold of a big Shannon fish.' A day or so afterwards he hooked a big one and it broke him to pieces! That is what the Shannon fish do to you, and there are no fish like them. I have purposely omitted any account of the fishing that used to be at Killaloe. Those days are past, although if you want trout-fishing you will get some first-class sport, and you will have a great welcome from Miss Grace, who will make you very much at home in her small hotel.

From the latest information obtained, it would appear that there are as many fish in the water as in other years. In January, 1930, before the fishing opened, there was a large run of big fish.

'But what happened to them all?' you will say.

The answer is, 'They all ran straight through.'

'But why did they do this?'

Answer: 'Because the conditions were altered, owing to the constant change in the height of the water.'

The explanation for this was, that the 'Scheme' had not settled down this year (1930), and much had to be done in experimenting with the raising and lowering of the sluice gates, so that the water never had a chance. However, I am

assured on good authority that things will be different and the water, in the early spring, will remain at a more constant level.

What is left of the Shannon?

Not much it is true, but we must make the best of what there is left. While we are thinking about this run of fish through Castleconnell, the following observation might be made. In the old days it was said, and I think rightly, that the large fish did not appear to go above the sluices at Killaloe, and the old fishermen would tell you that they slacked back to the spawning beds below Castleconnell. This opinion appears to be well founded as hardly any large fish were seen or caught above Killaloe, there may have been a few, but I am speaking generally.

Now let us see what is happening. Since the salmon pass has been made at Parteen Villa, the fish have been romping up, big and small in great numbers. What they will do when they find themselves in a big strange lake, remains to be seen. I doubt if they will return and go down the river again to spawn, and if not, they will have to find other spawning grounds higher up the lakes.

The fishing now begins at 'World's End,' just above Castleconnell, and from there down to the ferry, just below Castleconnell, there is magnificent fishing, more especially round about the eel weir.

Above the ferry there is a long smooth piece of water, known as the 'Castle Lough,' on a fine evening I have seen salmon in large numbers, rising like trout. At the ferry there is a hold for big fish.

Taking the left hand bank we come to

'Woodlands.' There is a small pool at the head of this beat, just above the rapids. I confess to a feeling of nervousness whenever I fish this pool.

Imagine yourself in the middle of a long 'cot,' which is the type of boat used on the Shannon and which is like a Thames punt only narrower. Your two boatmen, one in the bow and the other in the stern, pole you out to the head of the rapids. There the 'cot' is held and if you are pretty good on your feet, you stand up.

The river is boiling over the rocks all round you.

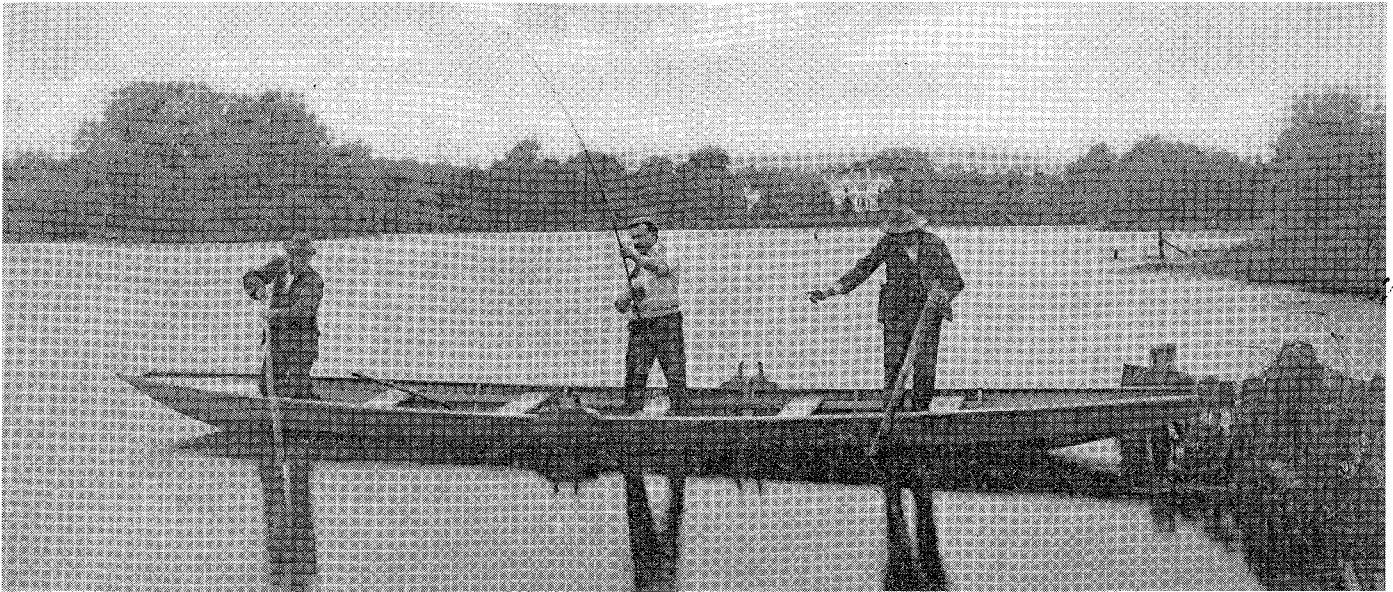
You are told to cast into this bit of wild water and if you hook a fish, 'Hold on like the devil!'

Well, the first time I fished this, I had not taken half a dozen casts before I was into a fish. Away he went, up and down, then across, round a rock and smash bang! It was over quicker than I can write. That fish was between 30 and 40 lbs., and they asked me to hold him!

The next time, more or less, the same thing happened, so you can see why one is inclined to a feeling of nervousness.

However, with stronger tackle and a stronger hand, I managed to hold the next fish and eventually killed five of the prettiest up to 25 lbs. I have ever caught. The great thing is to keep the rod high and to have a fairly long one, not less than 11 ft. 6 ins. and a large diameter reel, so that you can put on a heavy brake with the fingers.

Below the rapids, we come to a long fine sweeping pool, which is always a great hold for fish when the water is at medium height.



Playing a 43 lbs. Salmon at Castleconnell.

Limerick Museum.

This pool will take you two hours to fish properly. Below this we come to more rapid water, and it was here, in 1929, that Major Macdonnell caught his great fish of 51 lbs. The story of the capture of this fish would take too long to tell, but to have caught a fish of this size in that water was a great achievement.

'Woodlands' fishes down to Powall's Island, and I always look back to this beat with great pleasure. Now let us cross over to the right hand to the beat known as 'Doonass.'

'Doonass' starts at 'Sally Bush' and goes right away down to the Rock Islands.

It is divided into two beats, and is probably the best water on the Shannon, although for the past two years it has not fished well. 'Old Turf' is a grand pool, and just below this is 'Cooleen.' Both these pools hold big fish and many a fisherman has been broken here. Below 'Cooleen' is a nice little pool, one of the few that can be fished from the bank, and there is generally a fish or two there. This pool is known as the 'Dancing Hole.' A pretty name and well chosen. If you get a fish here, he will lead you a 'pretty dance' and you must be active on your feet, or he will be away and lost in no time. There is another cast from the bank a little below this, but personally I have never moved a fish there.

Now we come to a bend in the river and some high rocks and an old ruin, marked on the map.

At one time, I am told, this was the headquarters of the 'Hell Fire Club.' I have never heard the correct history of this club, but I understand the less said about it the better!

There is a kind of gallery cut round this rock, and this is the end of the top beat. It is a delightful place to sit down in the shelter of the rocks and watch the fish in 'Moreek.'

I remember once in 1929, I was sitting down having my lunch after one of those blank mornings with not a fish showing, when suddenly - owing, I suppose, to some atmospheric condition - five big fish started coming up. Not one of those fish was under 40 lbs., and the largest was near 60 lbs.! What a fish.

The lunch was put on one side and away we went in the boat. One big fish came right across my fly and missed. Then I put on a gold Devon and was very soon into one of the big ones. I had him on for about ten minutes, then he stopped, and I felt a grating feeling up the line and I guessed he was up against one of the sharp rocks. I shouted to the boatman to go over to him, and if I had only the presence of mind to slack the line, all might have been well, but we were too

late, the line was cut. He was a grand fish, we had seen him twice.

It was in this pool in 1928 fishing from the other side, that Col. Maunsell got eight fish in the day. Four of these fish were 30 lbs and over, and the best 37 lbs.

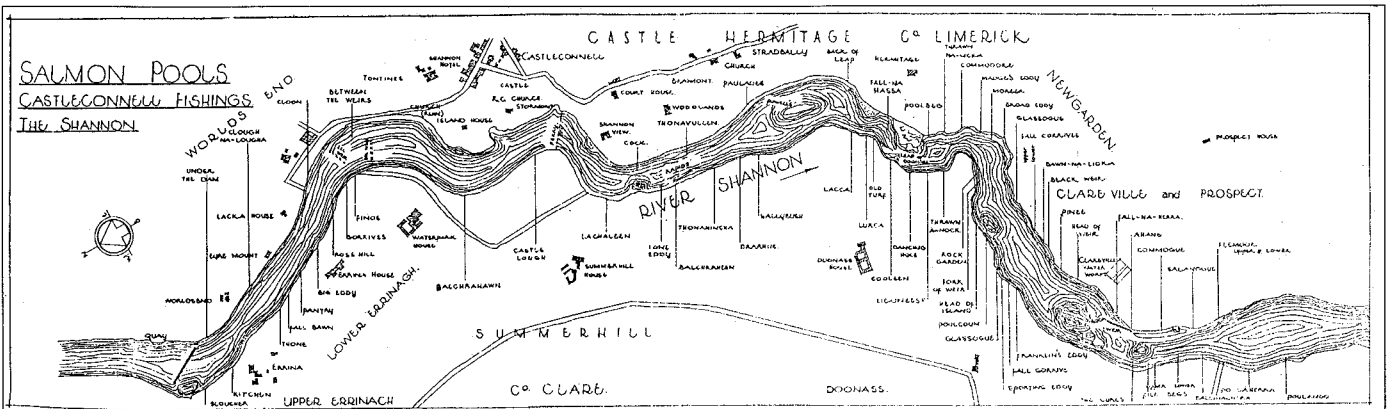
A number of fish had come into the pool the night before and he had the day of his life.

Below the ruins there is a pool known as 'Poulcoum.' It is a fine deep pool, and runs between the right bank and two small islands. It has a great reputation for holding heavy fish, but I have always found it disappointing. I have seen it crammed full of fish and have spent a great deal of time there, but I have only caught small ones.

In 1920 the Earl of Kingston was fishing this pool and lost a very big fish after playing him out. I could never get him to say how large the fish was, but he did say that the 45-pounder he had caught the day before was a 'baby' compared to the one he had lost. The river was full of big fish in 1928.

There are a few good catches below this when the water is high; then you come down to the 'Rock Islands' and here 'Doonass' ends.

'Landscape' is the next beat below 'Doonass' on the right bank. I have never fished this water from the right bank, but I know it from the opposite side.



Map of the salmon pools at Castleconnell by Robert Herbert 1941.



The Rapids of the Shannon: Castle Connell: print by T. Creswick / J.J. Hinchliff, 1841.
Limerick Museum.

There are many good catches and casting places, but I do not think the right bank fished as well as the left.

Below 'Landscape' there is no fishing worth speaking about. I remember once fishing from the opposite side and whereas I was getting into fish every quarter of an hour, the right-hand bank was doing nothing. Poor people, they looked awfully upset, and no wonder.

Now, let us go up the river again and have a good run down the left bank. I have already said a few words about 'Woodlands,' so we will start at the beat below called 'Hermitage.' Formerly the property of Lord Massey, the house is now a ruin, having been burnt out in the bad times. It stands in a wonderful position overlooking the river and from it you can see from 'Prospect' to 'Woodlands.' I know no more beautiful site for a house anywhere.

Mr. Whipp owned the Gort Henry water at Killaloe before the 'Flood' and afterwards 'Hermitage' water. I believe he did quite well, even in the bad year 1930, but he is a hard worker and a first-class spinner.

'Hermitage' is a rough and rugged beat, and anything but easy for a newcomer. I have a friend a member of the Fly Fishers Club, who got his 'cot' overturned here and lost everything.

The 'Hermitage' water fished down to the head of a large pool 'Moreek.' 'Newgarden' in high water takes a lot of beating.

I have caught a number of fish in this water and lost quite a number. On the edge of 'Moreek' where the water curls over, there is a small catch, but it always holds a fish, and a large one. The boat is held at the edge of the rapid water, and

there are only about a dozen casts. The first time I fished this, one of the big ones threw himself at my prawn. Nothing would stop him, he cut me and gave me a very sore knuckle. The next time I tried, more or less the same thing happened. I asked my boatman if anyone ever caught a fish in that place, and he said he could not remember anyone! When I heard that I did not mind so much.

'Newgarden' has some fine catches in wild water. The 'Broad Eddy,' 'Glassogate' and a few others, until you come to the head of 'Pinee.' I have had some grand fish here.

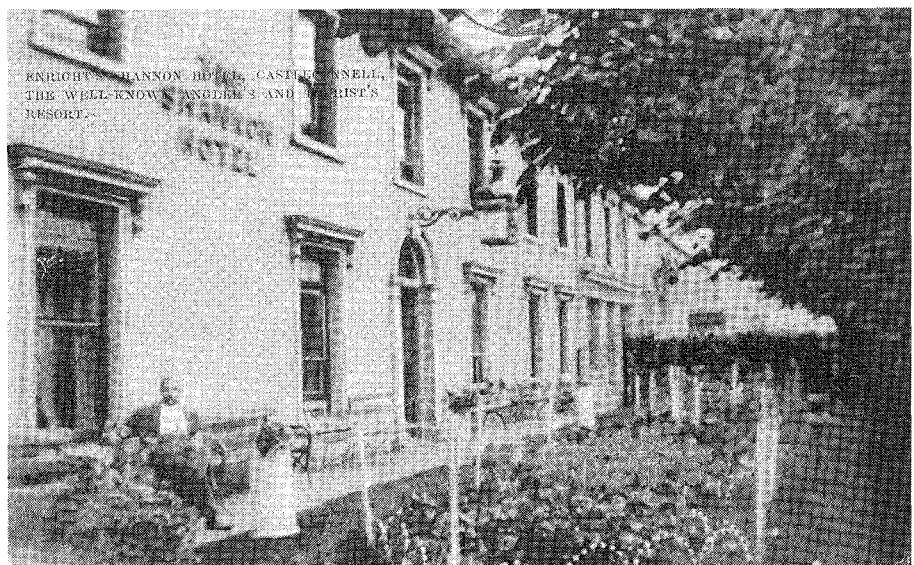
Now we come to 'Clareville' and 'Prospect.' This beat starts at 'Pinee,' about half-way down. There is a weir at this pool and here the salmon, after ascending, remain in the still water just above. In fairly high water, it fishes extremely well and salmon will rise all round you. It is a nice place to get a fish, unless he takes it into his head to go over the weir and then the chances are on the fish.

You can walk out on the weir and get some pretty casting down to Major Foster's bungalow.

Below the bungalow there are several good pools, especially opposite the old mill, then there is a long stretch of fine water which will take the best part of a morning to fish properly. Below this, there are a few small catches in rough weather, and this is practically the end of fishing.

A few reminiscences and a word about tackle before this article finishes. To fish the Shannon successfully, you must have the best and strongest tackle, much stronger than any other river I know. Your spinning rod should not be less than 11 ft. 6 ins., and your line a heavy one. Many fishermen prefer to 'pitch,' instead of casting from the reel. This is a local term and means that your line is coiled in the bottom of the boat, which enables you to cast with a heavy dressed line. This thickness of line cannot be cast direct from the reel. Personally, I use a very strong undressed line on a 4½-inch reel.

The rocks at Castleconnell are notorious and any light line, however



Enright's Shannon Hotel, Castleconnell, 1905. Limerick Museum.



Postcard c. 1910 published by Mrs. M Scanlan, Stationer, Castleconnell.

Limerick Museum.

strong, is soon cut on the sharp edges.

As to baits, in the early part of the year, the gold and silver Devon is as good as anything. In April and May, the majority of fish are caught on the prawn. In May your prawns must be smaller. Fresh prawns you must have, the fish knows the difference between these and bottled prawns very quickly. If you fish with bottled prawns, your boatman will take no interest in you.

We found that the best tackle was a single triangle mounted on wire, with very strong hooks. A wire trace about a yard long, with a celluloid spinner at the top, so as to spin the prawn.

About the Fly? I remember making a little calculation about fly-fishing, and have counted the approximate hours I had fished with a fly each day and the number of casts, I arrived at the approximate number of casts in three seasons fishing. I then counted the number of fish I had caught on the fly and the number risen. The results were so ludicrous that it is best to leave it at that, and say that it is a fine exercise and requires a great deal of skill!

The fact is, fish do not take the fly well at Castleconnell, and as far as I can hear, they never did!

At Killaloe, it was different, quite fifty per cent of the fish I caught there were on a fly. The reason for this I cannot account for. I remember the first time I went to Castleconnell I thought my tackle was strong enough for anything. Never shall I forget the day when I was completely broken in four large fish and lost two others from weak hooks.

I told my boatman to row back and we

would go home. Before we got to the bank I said, 'Let's have another go.' So we did have another 'go,' and I got three fish, 20, 24 and 28 lbs., but these were only the small ones! On another occasion, Pat Myers and I saw a huge fish below the weir at Pinee. I put a prawn over him and got in touch immediately. Away he went, down and across to the small island shown on the map. Something had to be done, so I put on all the power I could and yard by yard, got him back to the pool, and I said to Pat, 'I think that has broken his spirit.' Not a bit of it, off he started again on the same journey, but this time the triangle straightened and he was gone. I remember seeing a curious incident on 'Hermitage.' I was fishing on the 'Doonass' side opposite. The man on 'Hermitage' got into a big fish. His rod and tackle appeared to be on the light side and the fish gradually took him down and finally broke him.

This is not an unusual occurrence on 'Hermitage,' but the point of the story is that, not long after, he went back to the same place and hooked another large fish. The same fight began again. The fish took him down and again there was a slack line. This time when he reeled up, there was the tackle attached to his minnow, which he had lost half an hour before. Poor man, he had no luck that day! All these accounts will perhaps frighten the intending visitor, but don't dwell too much on these disasters. I had my good days when I had adjusted my tackle to suit the fish and the river. I remember telling my friends on the Wye that their fish were like 'goldfish' compared with these wild devils.

The beauties of Castleconnell cannot be surpassed anywhere, in my opinion. Wonderful park-like lands and beautiful trees run down to the river. Your greeting when you return to Castleconnell each year cannot be more delightful, and one cannot wish for more kindly hospitality than what one finds at the Shannon Hotel. I hope I may return there often.

Just one word more and my article is completed. The great Shannon Power Scheme, which has cost many millions, and which has harnessed nature, must be admired for its great engineering achievement and the enterprise of its Government.

Ireland has always lacked the power which other countries have enjoyed, either through their coalfields or through water power. Where, one might ask, would England be if she had not her coal.

Ireland has lacked coal and therefore has few industries. Now that she has the power, through the great Shannon scheme, let us hope that it will bring her prosperity in the near future.

Let us also hope that the Government will do their utmost to protect the salmon industry and allow sufficient water to flow down the river at Castleconnell. Something more than this is needed. They must buy up the Laxweir at Limerick and curtail the netting in the river and the sea.

Having done so much to assist and safeguard the fish, let us hope they will do their best to allow more fish to ascend the river.

From Eric Taverner et al: Salmon Fishing, Lonsdale Library of Sports, Games and Pastimes, London, 1948.