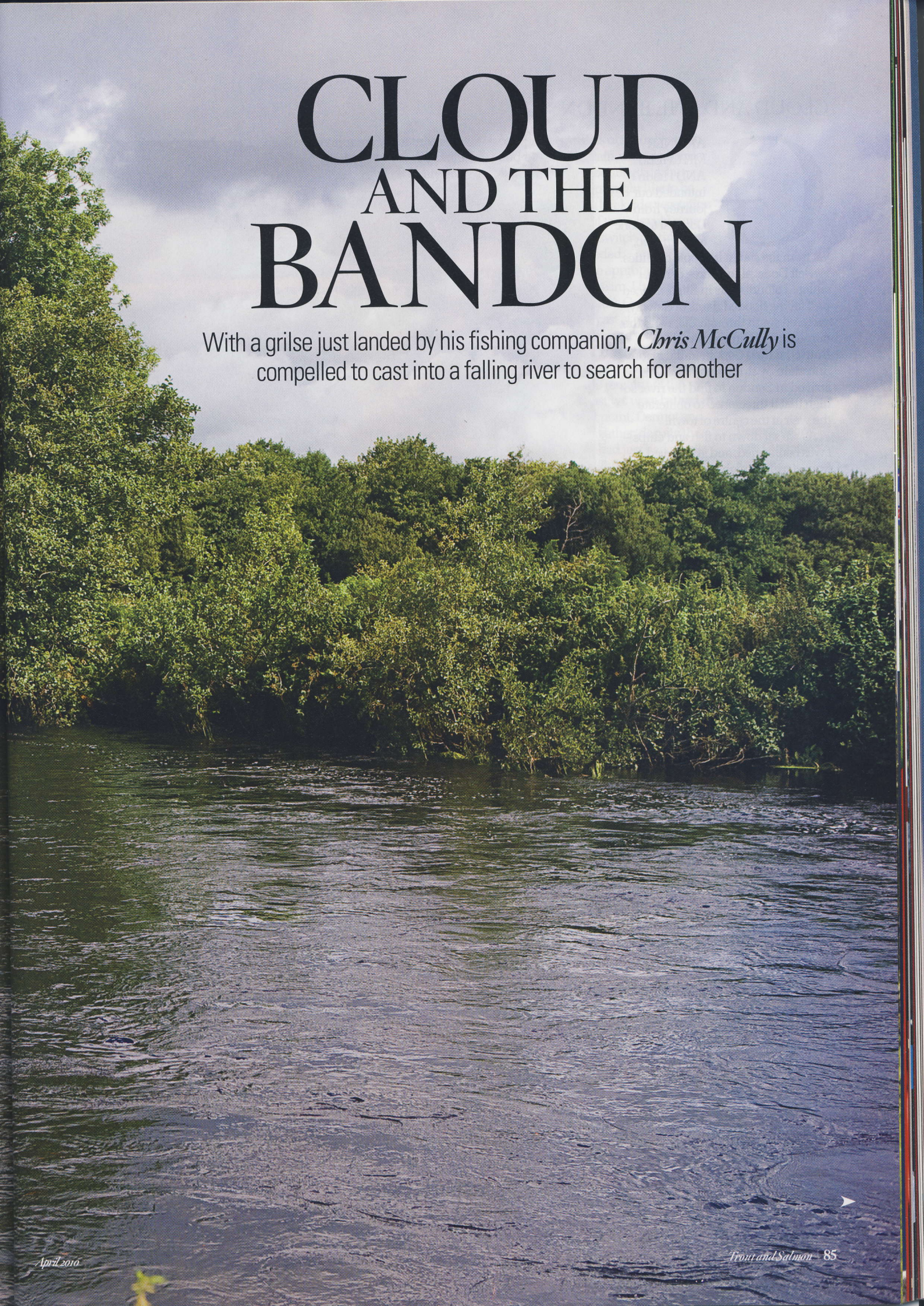


Chris McCully
fishes the
Kilcoleman stretch
of the Bandon.





CLOUD AND THE BANDON

With a grilse just landed by his fishing companion, *Chris McCully* is compelled to cast into a falling river to search for another

GARDINER MITCHELL AND I hadn't intended our journey from Donegal to Cork to be an epic,

yet from the start it had epic qualities. We left Donegal in a scree of rain, suffered cloudbursts in Sligo, sluiced past all the flooded rivers of Galway, careered south through Clare and the rain-darkened limestones of the Burren, skirted Cork in traffic made uncertain by storms, and finally arrived in Bandon to find the river so high that it threatened to obliterate the weir at the centre of town.

As we sat down to fish and chips – I was bedraggled, and gritty-eyed from staring at high-speed windscreen-wipers for several hundred miles – our host asked where we'd come from. "Donegal," we said. He wondered how many days the journey had taken. "We left this morning," we said. There was a pause. Something with basil in it leaked into the haddock. Our host shook his head in disbelief. "All that way..." he mused. I silently finished his sentence... "You must be mad."

We'd gone to Bandon to fish for sea-trout, since the River Bandon, while well known as a fine salmon stream, also offers excellent sea-trout fishing in its lower reaches, particularly during the hours of summer darkness. With such high water, though, sea-trout fishing of the kind we'd planned was out of the question.

Night fell early over Bandon as we walked from the after-supper coffee towards some merciful sleep. We detoured past the town's Georgian houses to have another look at the weir. Pink, blue or yellow-painted, the elegance of the architecture set a scene from the early 19th century. I half-expected to see some buck in a



PHOTOGRAPHS: GARDINER MITCHELL

"I've caught salmon occasionally, almost always while fishing"

Chris watches a falling and clearing River Bandon at the weir.

neckerchief and tights reel into the darkness having lost (but not, one hopes, too heavily) at a quiet hand of canasta. Our route also took us past solidly built churches of different denominations and past a Methodist chapel. As I looked at Bandon's weir, and saw that the river had risen yet higher, I reflected that if we were to fish at all we would surely need divine intervention.

The following morning we stood again by the weir. The river, while still in flood, had dropped a touch from its zenith of the previous night. Best of all, the water was coursing relatively clear. Our companions for the day, Michael Hennessy and Dermot Long of the South Western Regional Fisheries Board, were distinctly encouraging, and as Dermot guided me through the intricacies held in the computer linked to the Bandon's fish-counter I detected a surge of enthusiasm.

The Bandon, Dermot said, had a run of salmon and sea-trout that in a normal year would count 6,000-plus fish over 25cm, which is the smallest fish detectable by the counter's sensors. (The total would therefore not include many herling). There are spring salmon, a run of grilse and sea-trout and an abundant stock of brown trout averaging 12 oz. Increasingly, fishers were practising catch-and-release with salmon and sea-trout, and the stock of fish was generally good. In truth, the Bandon seems a

rich and generous stream – a stream with such great aspirations that it has become an important river – and it seems no accident that Peter O'Reilly not only praises the Bandon highly (*Rivers of Ireland*, 2004) but also says that its potential is "vastly underestimated".

It's true that I've caught salmon occasionally, almost always while fishing for sea-trout. Vanishingly rarely, I've even caught salmon while trying to catch salmon. But on the whole, salmon have been a series of more or less thrilling accidents punctuating a persistent if uncertain angling life. I also wonder whether I have the temperament for salmon fishing. Salmon-fishers seem to need an inexhaustible supply not so much of patience but of deliberation: water height and clarity, ambient weather, state of tide, angle of sun, amount of dissolved oxygen... all those variables, deliberated always. And when that slow, unstoppable pull finally comes, the lift of the rod isn't a quick turn of the wrist but is itself a thing of firm deliberation. Sea-trout fishers, on the other hand, seem more mercurial – endlessly improvising, infinitely curious, most at home under the evanescent pewter shadows of the moon, restless, nomadic and apparently inconstant... or perhaps I'm simply describing aspects of myself.

It's impossible to generalise, and unwise in any case (and in any field

Dermot searches the computer for evidence of fish running the weir.



of endeavour) to make mere tendency statements. I suspect the truth is that I've never fished seriously for salmon because I've never been seriously able to afford to do so. Nevertheless, as on the Bandon, when the chance comes to put a fly over salmon then – of course – I take it.

We drove the short distance to Ballineen bridge, where Dermot unshipped a 13 ft double-hander, an 8-weight floater, and a spool of 10 lb fluorocarbon from which he constructed a leader to which was knotted a size 8 Cascade tied on a double iron. Gardiner and I meanwhile tackled up with the single-handers we'd brought with us to fish for sea-trout. At normal heights, a single-hander would be adequate for fishing the Bandon

during the summer, but at times of high water, and on the lower river, a double-hander would probably give more effective coverage.

Below Ballineen bridge the river coursed through a large corner pool. Seen from the right bank, the fish lie on the left, in the angle of the corner where the flow is slackest. Dermot covered the taking lies with enviable ease while I mooched on a pool upstream, wondering whether anyone would notice how messy my mixture of switch-casting, roll-casting and steeple-casting actually was. I'm certain Dermot had noticed, but all he said, very kindly, was: "I think you've covered it, all right." We moved on.

The waters of Kilcoleman Park, owned by David Lamb, lie downstream of Ballineen bridge, and

comprise 1.2 miles of fly-only stream and pool. Here again, a single-hander would normally be adequate, but prospective visitors might like to be aware that there's bankside vegetation bordering some of these lovely runs and that roll- and switch-casting will sometimes be needed.

We began in the appropriately named Lamb's Stream. Using a duplicate of Dermot's Cascade I cast square, mended, cast at a steeper angle downstream, and allowed the fly to drift. I tried to vary the pace, the presentation. Cloud fell away from the sun and as the remains of the flood souged past we were bathed in sunshine. At that point, Dermot and Michael took a breather, despite the fact that Michael had just had a pull to a size 8 Stoa's Tail. Dermot

**Dermot, below,
nets Chris's
salmon.**



for sea-trout. Vanishingly rarely, I've even caught salmon while trying to catch salmon"



CLOUD AND THE BANDON *continued*

explained that on the Bandon, in particular, cloud seemed to be essential. "I've never yet caught a salmon here," he said, "when the sun was shining... though there are others who say they have."

When the sun disappeared again into a bank of cumulus, Dermot disappeared, too, in an upstream direction. I'd only just resumed fishing when there was a distant shout. Such a shout can only ever mean one thing, and having squelched our way rapidly down the edge of a field of maize twice a man's height, we arrived at Wren's Stream to find Dermot landing a beautiful grilse of around 5 lb. The fish had that ocean-sheen of blue still on its back and was pristine and clean-scaled. It had taken the Cascade, of course – that hint of orange in clearing water at the edge of the current, something visible, wavering, attractive... "I just fished it round," said Dermot, "outside the grasses, and he hit me..." – he looked briefly over his shoulder from where he was cradling the grilse in the current, and pointed with his chin – "...right there".

"Right there" was a draw of water where the current smoothed at the end of a relatively turbulent stream: exactly the place a running fish would pause.

The sun, which had re-emerged while Dermot was landing his grilse, disappeared behind a flotsam of cloud. That made me strangely decisive. I lengthened line, cast, and mended once so that the Cascade would swim as slowly as possible. "If a fish takes, Chris," I muttered to myself, "let it turn and take line. Slow down."

The Cascade swung. The line drew, heavily. I allowed the loop of line to run through my fingers, and the tension became the accelerating pull of a taking salmon. Before I could tell myself to slow down I had already, by some intervention of the angling gods, slowed down. For once, I became a man of firm deliberation, and somehow knew when I finally tightened into the salmon that I wasn't about to lose him.

He was a remarkably well-behaved fish, dour and heavy on the single-hander. The only time I was momentarily disconcerted was when the salmon began to lash at the line with his tail – movements that translated into repeated, and repeatedly severe, thumps on the rod. "It's not good," offered Dermot's



Chris and Dermot pose with the fish, before releasing it.

disembodied voice from somewhere behind me, "when they start rattlin' on the rod like that."

A great deal of rattlin' was going on. Then the rattlin' stopped and the salmon made a short run across and downstream. Water fell from the intermediate line in strung pearls of concentrated sunlight. I could feel the salmon tiring.

I suspected we had an improbable opportunity of landing him early. Dermot, who'd acquired a pair of polaroids from somewhere, was waiting downstream with the net. I imagined that as I worked the fish back upstream there would be just one moment when he'd be off balance. And if at that precise moment I could turn him...

Perhaps because the angling gods had heard us, or perhaps simply because they were looking the other

way, it worked like a Blue Charm. Dermot moved gracefully with the net, sunlight burst in spray from the meshes and the salmon's energy, everyone was suddenly smiling, and the work, at last, was almost done.

The salmon had been in the river for a fortnight, we thought, as we estimated him at around 6½ lb. He was a handsome fish, and we were absolutely determined that he should be released back to his journey. And therefore, on that afternoon on the Bandon, in bright late-afternoon sunlight, you would have seen four grown men clustered around a net at the edge of the river as if gathered there to honour some sacred relic.

I lifted the Cascade from his lower jaw, held him upright in the current, felt the energy return to his body as it was cradled in my hands, felt the pulse of tail, the push of body... and then he was away, back to a journey he'd complete later that autumn in the waters of the Bandon, way upstream under the autumn clouds and the gaze of the angling gods.



"Perhaps because the angling gods heard us, or were looking the other way, it worked like a Blue Charm"

FACTFILE

● **Fishing** Kilcoleman Park has just over a mile of the River Bandon which includes ten named pools and some splendid fly (fly-only) water. Day-rods become available if residents of the self-catering cottages on the estate do not wish to use the river. The fishery lies upstream of Bandon, close to Enniskeane. There are spring salmon, there is a run of grilse and sea-trout, and abundant brown trout, which average 12 oz. Further contact details for Kilcoleman: Tel: 00353 23 8847279 E-mail: gamefishing@eircom.net

● **Tactics** Single-handed 7-8-wt rods of 10-11 feet are often used for salmon, with a light double-hander for high water and/or in spring. For trout, 4-5-wt rods of 9-10 feet would be more than adequate. Salmon flies are generally singles and doubles in 8s to 14s.

● **Website** Find further information about the Bandon, and other rivers in Cork, on the website of the South Western Regional Fisheries Board: <http://www.swrfb.com/fishing/salmonandtrout/cork/bandon.htm>

● **Accommodation** Kilcoleman Park offers two self-catering cottages, and bed-and-breakfast accommodation can be arranged nearby in

Kilcoleman Rectory. We stayed very comfortably at Kilbrogan House, Bandon, Co. Cork. Tel: +353 23-8844935 www.kilbrogan.com

