

A Stormy Night on Lough Neagh

by *John McCourt*

I grew up along the shores of the biggest freshwater lake in the British Isles called Lough Neagh in the north of Ireland. My grandmother, Ann, lived closer to the lough than our family, and I loved to visit her. My mother, who could not swim, was terrified of water and feared that I would drown, so she said not to go near the lough.

One Saturday evening, I went to visit my grandmother. I would have been nine or ten at the time. The neighbors, the Mc Elkennys, who lived on the next farm, were fishermen. They would go on the lough early in the morning to set out nets to catch fish called eels, and, then, in the evenings go out again to gather in the catch. That Saturday, the neighbor's son, Paddy, came over and asked if I would go out with them to bring in the catch. Paddy was older than I was and very athletic. I had heard stories about what a great swimmer he was and hoped that one day he might teach me to swim.

I was excited when my grandmother gave me permission to go with Paddy and his father, Johnny.

I walked with Paddy and Johnny to the boat dock. The boat was wooden, about sixteen feet long. We all got into the boat. I sat in the back. There were two oars to row the boat, which also had an engine. This was the first time I had been out on the lake, and the experience was a treat. I watched the wild ducks as they flew overhead going in to spend the night in the bog land. When the sun began to set, it was a sight to behold, as it was reflected on the water. Small waves lapped against the sides of the boat. We traveled quite a distance from the shore before Johnny stopped the boat.

Johnny and Paddy started to pull in the nets, and I helped place the eels in buckets. By the time we had all the nets in, it was dark, and the wind had begun to pick up. Johnny told Paddy to restart the motor on the boat and we would head for shore. The wind grew stronger causing the water to become rough. Now the waves were larger, and water was washing over the sides into the boat. Fortunately, the engine had a bilge pump designed to pump out any water that came in.

Paddy told me that his father could not swim, but not to worry; we would get to shore soon. Paddy explained to me that this was true of many of the Lough shore fishermen. As we continued to travel toward the land, which was no longer visible, the storm began to strengthen to almost gale force winds, but apart from getting soaked by the waves, we were all okay.

I was unaware at the time that violent storms could spring up unexpectedly on Lough Neagh. This night was going to be one of those nights. Johnny reassured me that I had nothing to worry about as his boat was made to survive these kinds of storms. By that time, the waves were crashing over the side of the fishing boat, and the bilge pump was unable to keep up with the volume of water coming in. We scooped out the water with containers, working hard to keep the water level from getting too high and sinking the boat. When I think back to that night, I was both feeling both scared and excited at experiencing a storm like this.

No one was too worried until the motor stopped working and in the ensuing panic, Paddy let one of the oars wash overboard.

Johnny shouted, "Paddy, get that bloody motor going."

Paddy was feverously trying to start the engine, and, Johnny with only one oar was unable to stop the boat from turning broadside into the waves. There was danger that the boat would be swamped and sink. No matter how fast we tried to remove the water, it was clear that unless Paddy got the motor started, we would sink.

Johnny got a rope, which was about one half inch thick, and tied it around his son's waist, and then my waist, and finally his own. Johnny's plan was that as his son could swim, he would be able to keep us all afloat, should the boat sink.

(I remember telling the story to my father later, and he said, "That would have guaranteed that all of you would have drowned.")

When it seemed all hope was gone, I heard the engine start, and the bilge pump began to drain the water as we headed to the shore. I would have had no idea where the shore may have been, as it was pitch dark and we had no light. Johnny and Paddy knew where they were going, though, and soon we began to see lights along the shore.

Johnny and Paddy's family, as well as my grandmother and neighbors, were gathered on the boat dock. Everyone had been very concerned, as we were an hour overdue, and the storm had been raging. Everyone was excited and grateful that we had made it back safely. I was thankful that I had survived.

My grandmother gave me a big hug and we went to her house where she cooked some eels that Johnny and Paddy had sent home with us. The eels were like snakes, and when she cut them into small pieces and fried them in the pan over the fire, they jumped around. I was amazed. I was very unsure about eating eels, but I could not refuse my grandmother. It turned out that the eels were delicious and, over the years, I have enjoyed them several times.

Grandmother Ann told me it might be best if I didn't mention the events of that evening to my mother, but I will always remember my night on the Lough and my fried eels.