Time and Tide

CURACHMEN OF THE WEST

By **G. J. Marcus.**

Preface to

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For nearly an hour the men stood waiting to launch the curach. It was blowing fresh from the south-west, with hard squalls of wind and rain; and the breakers came charging in, rank after rank, in unending succession. From time to time the men would retreat before the biggest sea, afterwards shoving their curach well out into the water again. It looked as if the long-awaited *deibhil*, or lull, would never come.

Seated in the stern of the curach, in oilskins and sou'wester, was the young priest from Inishere, the southernmost of the Aran Islands, which lay from two to three miles off across Sunda Salach (Foul Sound), at present almost invisible in the rain and spume. He had said mass early that morning after crossing over from Inishere the night before, and was now returning home.

The boat slip on Inishmaan, in the midst of the Aran group, was exposed to the full force of the heavy western swell. In anything of a breeze, the sea made fast with the weather tide. Sunda Salach was a forest of tossing wave-crests. The horizon beyond was leaden grey, and jagged like a saw. Along the black cliffs to the southward white pillars of foam were continually rising and falling. The weather showed no sign of moderating.

The usual crowd had collected down by the shore; the men in their homespuns and rawhide pampooties, the women in their red woollen gowns and petticoats, with shawls pulled over their heads. On the edge of the crowd a black dog ran to and fro, dodging the sprays and barking incessantly. A low murmur of Gaelic mingled with the hiss of the rain on the battered slip, the wailing of seabirds wheeling and circling high above the grey limestone crags, and the low, sullen thunder of the groundsea.

All this time the look-out, standing higher up the slope, was intently watching a rocky point to the southward to gauge the strength of the incoming seas. Again and again the grip of the three curachmen tightened on the gunnel of their craft as they made ready to rush her down and out into the surf; again and again the look-out, watching every sea, had waved them back.

Suddenly three great seas swept in to the shore. The men hurriedly retreated with the curach as before. Then, as a flood of yeasty grey water came swirling over the slip, the look-out snatched off his hat and waved it frantically in the air. 'Anois! Anois !' (' Now! Now !'), he shouted. The excitement of the spectators rose to fever pitch; men rushed forward to the help of the crew; together they ran the curach down the slip, plunged her into the surf – the curachmen scrambling in over the gunnel and grabbing their oars – and then, at a frenzied yell from the bowman, the helpers let go. As the next breaker bore down on them the crew almost ceased pulling: the curach's bow shot up until she nearly stood on end: a yell of apprehension arose from the crowd on the slip as a blinding cloud of spray burst over the prow: then the curach plunged safely down into the long hollow beyond, reappearing several yards further out. For a few more minutes the people stood watching the curach's rhythmic swoop up, over, and down the huge, toppling rollers. But the danger was now past and presently they turned towards their homes.

It was a scene which Inishmaan must have witnessed, time and again, for generations. Both the launching and the beaching of a curach in such weather would put the seamanship of her crew to the severest possible test. The danger of the return – if the bad weather should continue – was at least as great as that of the departure. Before the curach could be safely beached, she was in imminent peril of being swamped, or even capsized, by a heavy sea. Again the long-drawn-out suspense: the men watching and muttering among themselves, the women alternately weeping and praying, while the curach hung, for minute after anxious minute, her prow constantly turned to the sea, on the edge of the surf-line, waiting for a smooth.

This unique craft, the three- or four-oared curach, perhaps the handiest, lightest, most buoyant afloat, which is still in general use in certain parts of the Atlantic coast of Ireland and nowhere else in Europe, is the descendant of one of the most ancient types of vessel in the western world. It must have been in use for centuries before the first mention of it occurs in classical literature. Both before and after the late Imperial age it was a significant factor, not only in the maritime, but also in the political and ecclesiastical, developments in these islands. It is closely knit in with the early history of the Celtic peoples. It is the key to the fuller comprehension of a whole era of seamanship and navigation. In the hide-covered craft were launched the earliest recorded ventures far out into the Western Ocean. The Irish curach has a long, a very long, history behind it.

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