

CURRAGHS ANCIENT AND MODERN

By Wallace Clark.

Boats and sailing are mentioned more than thirty times in Adamnan's seventh century 'Life of Saint Columba.' There is ample internal evidence to show that the writer was familiar with sea voyaging and he made it clear that in St. Columba's time passages between Iona and Ireland were made both in wooden boats and skin covered curraghs. Curraghs were evidently more common but no details have survived of the boat used on the original voyage from Derry, apart from the fact that she carried thirteen men.

For the 1963 centenary we decided to build a curragh rather than a planked boat for a number of reasons. The canvas covered curraghs now in use in the west of Ireland are direct descendants of the leather covered craft of the sixth century. In fact similar craft were observed by Julius Caesar when he invaded Britain in B.C. 54 — they were unlike anything he had met on the Continent, and the description included in his commentaries is accurate of a present day curragh.

Perhaps it should be made clear that the word 'coracle' implies a smaller type of river boat, said to be of quite different origin and designed to carry one or two men only in calm water, there are a very few still surviving on Welsh rivers. The seagoing Irish curragh can claim a unique system of construction and design almost unchanged for over two

thousand years. In fact its form is so simple and yet highly functional that it leaves little room for change. The primæval requirements of a craft which could be built without the use of a forge or sawmill and where timber is scarce, still remain in the West of Ireland to-day. Materials have changed certainly; tarred canvas has replaced greased hides within the last hundred years, iron fastenings appear in certain places instead of thongs, but despite such change of detail, the essentials of certain proportions for safe and effortless rowing, of a high bow for launching off a beach into the surf, and of lightness to allow of snatching her clear of the water and quickly to safety on men's shoulders have not altered. To anyone who enjoys small boat handling, the curragh is a particular joy and the very thinness of its skin gives one a feeling of being in touch with the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep to a degree never quite equalled in a planked boat.

In building one we had the advantages of selecting something at once unique to Ireland, as seaworthy as any wooden boat, ideal for beach landings and camping under, and cheap to build. Above all we could pay a compliment to the design of the present day working curragh by copying and enlarging it, and yet still be 'in period'

There was one unforeseen complication, the race-course of the same name. This became a family joke after someone overhearing us saying we were off to the Curragh, wished us luck in picking the winners!

To settle lines and dimensions, Richard McCullagh

got down to his drawing board with an artist's eye and practised skill.

The biggest currachs currently in use are twenty-four feet long and carry a crew of four. We had to carry thirteen men and about a hundredweight of gear for each. Looking back, it is hard to realize that at one stage we were so uncertain as to the practicability of a large curragh that we were seriously considering going in two small ones.

The question of size and in particular of beam is closely tied up with the system of rowing to be used. Most west coast currachs scull to-day with each man having two oars, one on each side. The maximum beam for this system is about five feet six inches, so it would have forced on us an impractically long narrow boat. It is also more difficult for amateurs to row this way efficiently, so we decided on a beam of six feet, and one man pulling a thirteen foot oar on each thwart. We were unwilling to go above thirty feet overall length, so seven rowing benches were all that could be fitted in and this, of course, meant a maximum of seven oarsmen in action at one time. A third system known as double-banking which has two men on each bench, each with an oar on his own side, requires a beam of seven feet at least. At this early stage we were greatly concerned with having a boat light enough to be picked up easily and handled in surf by thirteen inexperienced hands, and also with minimum windage and wetted area for pulling to windward. In the light of experience we should certainly have double banked. The extra foot or eighteen inches of

beam would have given us much needed extra reserve buoyancy and storage space, and while two watches of rowers on a long pull are highly desirable, it is as we learned, even more desirable that for periods where special effort is required every man should be able to pull his weight, e.g. when in danger of being embayed as we were twice or when fighting up into shelter against an offshore wind. It would also have looked better for ceremonial purposes at the beginning and end of the voyage.

Next came the question of rig. St. Columba, according to St. Adamnan, sailed more often than he rowed. Present day Donegal currachs sail not at all. Those in Aran and Dingle set only a tiny lug sail right in the bow for running and reaching, so modern practice gave no guide.

Richard selected a small edition of the Shetlands sixarene rig—this is of Viking origin, possibly older, a local variant of the dipping lug and sets outside the shrouds. The sail made by McCready's of Belfast set beautifully, and with this in calm water we could make good a course eight points off the wind by pointing up five to six points off, leeway, in even a moderate beam sea was of the order of three points. When we were reaching across to Islay from Portballintrae in Force 3 to 4 a fishing line trolled from amidship made such an angle to windward that at first I thought it must have some sort of otter board on it, but it was just plain leeway! Apart from this the curragh stood up to her canvas remarkably well and ran 'like a sputnik'

Steering was usually a problem — she was very hard mouthed and inclined to gripe — we used an eight foot steering oar in an iron crutch on the transom. (A recess in the transom, the usual sort of sculling notch, which we tried first, proved much too weak). It was generally necessary except on a dead run to have several oars going, sometimes to windward, usually to leeward, or at least the two after oars poised ready to backwater to assist the helmsman. This was inefficient and in addition it is very doubtful if there is any historical basis for a centre line steering oar, such as ours as early as the sixth century. The centre line rudder did not come in until mediæval times and was then hailed as the greatest single invention in martime history (After spending a week fighting a losing battle with a steering oar, I heartily endorse this view!). In a curragh the centre line steering oar is additionally objectionable in that it forces the helmsman to sit right in the stern just where she is weakest structurally, is unsupported by water and needs spare buoyancy. Another time we would try steering by means of quarter steering oars mounted on pins on stout outriggers, the lee one would generally be the best to use. This would also have allowed us to build with a pointed stern which would have been historically and aesthetically much better. As it was, the smallness of the curragh forced us to place the helmsman and one or two other men with some of their gear right in the stern, we even had to build stern sheets (seats running fore and aft inside the gunwales) to give the helmsman something to

support himself by The stern did not like this a bit, for it robbed it of some of its all-important flexibility, and it split one rough March weekend off Dundrum , and though we easily repaired the damage, the transom slowly dropped lower and lower in the water as we voyaged so that we used to ship water there long before there was any danger of doing so elsewhere and the gunwale ceased to have any rise at the stern at all.

Soon after starting to plan, we met Jim Boyd, who builds a number of small curraghs annually as well as wooden boats, and he agreed to join the crew as well as build the curragh, a bold decision in the teeth of gloomiest prediction by local wiseacres. With his charming personality and great strength and skill as an oarsman, he proved the mainstay of the undertaking.

Having drawn the plans, Richard left the constructional details very largely to Jim. Donegal curraghs are the roughest built of the surprisingly varied west coast type, they serve their normal purpose ideally but the transom in particular is weak, and our curragh (directly arising from the fact that she was too small and hence overloaded) proved too light in scantlings and construction. A double gunwale would have been stronger, with an extra bilge stringer, and knees bolted, or screwed in position instead of being merely nailed.

To improve her sailing qualities a deeper forefoot which would have been held up to windward by the lee bow wave would have helped. The length and depth of the false keel could have been increased

slightly with advantage but any major enlargement here would have made beaching too difficult.

Dingle Peninsular curraghs use lee boards when sailing and there is no reason why we should not have done so too, but there never seemed to be time to make and try one out.

This has been quite a catalogue of weaknesses but most of them did not become apparent until we started to think analytically after the voyage was over. The fact is that Richard designed and Jim built us a beautiful and shapely curragh, much bigger than any seen in living memory—a curragh of which we all became very proud and fond.



LIST OF ALL GEAR

loaded into curragh in Derry

SAFETY

- 1 Rubber Dinghy—8 man (13 overload)
- 1 Tin Red Flares.
- 1 Emergency S.O.S. Transmitter.
- Verey Pistol and cartridges.

(Dinghy contains pack with rations, flares and survival kit)

COMMUNICATIONS

- 1 Walkie Talkie R.U.C. Radio (to communicate with Naval Drifter)
- 1 Portable Receiver for forecasts)

GENERAL

- Anchor: 20 lb. Fisherman.
- 40 fm. 1¼ Nyon, 5 fm. spare 1½ manila.
- Sea Anchor.
- 7 oars and 2 spare.
- Steering oar and crutch.