A Journey in 1979

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Footnotes were added during a review of the document in Oct. 2023. Some notes have clarifications or while others have comment based on the hindsight of 44 years.

The images at the end were also added in 2013.

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Decisions

Monday, the 8th of July, saw me standing on a sandbar at Raven Point which is the northern entrance to Wexford Harbour. I had come ashore to have a piece of chocolate, to smoke a cigarette and to think. For the previous eight hours the force 6 south-westerly wind had been trying to push me backwards and out to sea as I had struggled down from the north, keeping close to the lee of the long line of coastal sand-dunes.

Now I had to make a decision, not very different from the dozens of decisions which were forced upon me since I left Brandon village in my native County Kerry 36 days previously: I couldn't stay in this place for there were only miles of flat, low and featureless sand on which I couldn’t pitch my tent; I could retreat and paddle six miles back north to firm ground but the thought of

losing those hard-won miles was not very savoury; or I could go ahead and face the offshore sweeping winds and make for Rosslare Pt. at the far side of Wexford Harbour. If I reached there, I would be in the lee of the wind again and could sneak down to the safety of Rosslare Harbour.

My long, sleek, kayak was pulled up on the sand beside me, the wind tugged at my drenched clothes which, after a few minutes, had my teeth chattering. Under normal conditions the crossing ahead would not have cost me a second thought but I was tired, having been out for eight hard hours already and a sea canoeist isn't supposed to be able to make any significant progress against a wind like that. If anything happened on the crossing – a bout of dizziness perhaps, or an equipment failure – I would be blown out into the Irish Sea with no one to summon help and I would not be missed until my weekly call to Marine Rescue in Shannon became overdue. That would be in five days' time.

But, of course, I had to go ahead. If I was to get around Ireland I had to accept such chances and I had to raise my performance to levels that I did not think myself capable of. So, I put my life-jacket back on securely, got into the boat, slipped on my safety line and headed out into the wind again.

As always in situations like this, it was an agonising, body-battering paddle: head down to keep the spray out of the eyes, shoulders hunched forward with each stroke being a deliberate conscious pull, unlike the usual rhythmic, un-thought of action. Three or four strokes and the boat gains some momentum until the bow slaps into a wave, sending a shower of cold, wind-blown water into your face and the boat loses momentum. The whole process begins all over again and you gain another few feet until the combined action of the wind and the next wave bring you to an abrupt halt yet again. And, as always in a situation like this, your mind wanders: "What in the name of God am I doing in a sea like this in such a small boat? Why did I ever begin this mad venture". But you keep going, for there is no alternative.

Strictly for the Birds

Why indeed, I must have asked myself a thousand times. It had all begun, what now appeared to be a long time ago - in fact, it was around Christmas of I977. I had been canoeing for a couple of years as a student in a Physical Education college in Limerick[1], and I had sailed a couple of dinghies whenever I was in a position to bum one. I had no real experience of the sea, as sea canoeing was 'strictly for the birds' and sea canoeists were looked upon with a certain amount of awe by us, mere mortals. On top of this, a person needed a good deal of money to get the necessary gear together as well as transport to get around and, being 'a poor student', I had none of these.

Not me - I was normal

Canoeing around Ireland would, of course, be a great achievement for any Irish sea-canoeist as it had never been done and the prospect had been discussed often in canoeing circles. Then suddenly, as I was driving home late one night to the remote village of Boherbue in North Cork where I had been teaching for a few months[2], the thought struck me that I might be one of the first to paddle around Ireland. But, of course I was mad: other people did that sort of thing – one reads about them all the time. But not me: I was normal, I was ordinary. Still, the idea couldn't be pushed away: the seed had been planted and just wouldn't stop growing.

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[1] Now incorporated into the University of Limerick (all footnotes are from Oct. 2023).

[2] This dates it to late 1997 or early 1998.

From that time, it took a year-and-a-half to get ready. It was a time of frustrations, of endless discussions, of study and of banging my head off a stone wall most of the time. Thankfully, many of the details are now forgotten. The morning after the idea first struck me, I put a six-foot high wall-map on the floor of the school geography room, got out a piece of string and measured an approximate course around Ireland. It worked out at around I,600 miles. Within a few days, I had it all worked out - there would be about five paddlers and a back-up team of two with a car and caravan.

I was under no illusions about what I was facing, and knew there would be enormous problems, but I committed myself to a year-and-half of preparation. The problem was finding others who would be equally committed and soon I was forced to scale the whole thing down.

At the same, time I was looking into the feasibility of the project, collecting as much information as I could about similar expeditions and studying various pieces of equipment which were available. I had previously read many accounts of various trips on land, sea and air, I was trained as a Canoe Leader by the Irish Canoe Union and had spent a lot of time camping and in the hills, so that the whole concept of an advanced expedition was not new to me. I also had basic knowledge of survival techniques and principles.

Irreversible Decision

Then, to simplify matters, I decided to settle for a daring, self-sufficient, two-man expedition and set about finding someone who would be willing to put in time in organising and training but, above all, someone with whom I would be compatible on a long trip. On such an expedition, where the stresses are enormous and where people are living so closely together and dependent on each other, rows can break out over the smallest things and many expeditions have been ruined as a result. After asking a few, I ended up with Michael who had little experience but was game for anything and jumped at the idea. We drove back to west Kerry one evening to talk to Ger Kavanagh, who, with another fellow, had rowed a currach around the country a few years previously[3]. With his words, "Don't be afraid of the sea boys, go ahead", I made the irreversible decision to carry on.

Much work was done which bore little fruit - my first job was to get sponsors to finance the trip (I had just borrowed the price of car). I printed a prospectus and sent it to the leading newspapers plus the ten top companies on the stock exchange list. I got two negative replies and the uneasy feeling that things weren't going to be as easy as I had anticipated.

News began to reach me about other groups who were to attempt the same trip in I978, one from Scotland, one from Jersey and one from Northern Ireland. I would not be among the first after all.

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[3] Ger Kavanagh (Ger Ó Ciobháin) died in 2008 at the age of 80. He wrote a book call Cogarnach ár gCósta about this trip in 1975 that he did with another rower. I met a number of people who remembered seeing and/or meeting Ger and his companion on their voyage. It seemed from what I was told that they used an engine quite a bit and didn't get on very well together. I had sympathy for they using an engine: there were times when I definitely would have used an engine if I'd had one – the temptation would be just too much and would be justifiable on safety grounds. Also, while the naomhóg (currach) evolved in the west coast, it was not suitable for speed on long trips and didn't have the versatility of a kayak for landing on rough coasts. These factors didn't take from Ger's adventurousness and, when I arrived in Brandon at the end of my trip, Ger came out to meet me in a namhóg.

Then came the discovery, after a more careful calculation, that the distance was around I,000 miles and not the 1,600 that I originally estimated. I had made a fool of myself.

Little Headway

The problems were mounting, I was making very little headway and began to feel that the two-man pairing just wouldn't work out. Then, one night, in much the same fashion as the original idea had first struck me, I thought: "I'll just go alone! I'll just pack my boat and go, and to hell with everyone else".

Now, this was pure folly altogether: solo canoeing was almost unheard of on inland water, let alone on the sea. I rang Ann, my girlfriend[4], about the idea. She was an experienced canoeist, had done some sailing and, consequently, knew what was involved. "Now hold on; put this idea to one side and I'll discuss it with you the next time we meet ", she said in the same tone of voice one would use when trying to delay a person from jumping from a top story window while the firemen got the nets ready below.

However, when I discussed it with her, explained how it would save trouble and expense, as well as the enormity of the challenge, she accepted it. Indeed, without Ann's unselfishness, support and practical advice, I would never have gotten off the ground.

The trip now took on a new perspective altogether, changing from a physical challenge to more of a mental one. The risks were increased enormously as the lone canoeist is helpless if anything goes wrong. The Irish Canoe Union washed their hands of the project and attempts were made to have me expelled from the organisation[5]. Other canoeists - friends of mine - thought the idea a big joke. I wrote to the group from Jersey who did the first circumnavigation the previous summer. They had been practically reared in kayaks and were extremely competent, but their letters were very discouraging ... "not a thing we would do solo ... very big risk … don't say we didn't warn you…" etc., etc.[6]

Practical Preparations

However, the more the idea was knocked, the more determined I was to go ahead and got into the practical preparations. A boat and lots of gear had to be got from England[7]. A full set of light-

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[4] We got married in 1981 and have six grandchildren at the time of writing these notes in 2023.

[5] I still have a letter from the Irish Canoe Union dated Dec. 18th 1978. It doesn't mention 'sanctions' but it starts with a rather patronising tone: "Dear Tom, I gather you intend to paddle around Ireland next summer on your own. As you are of course aware, the sea is dangerous …". What follows is a whole lot of reasons not to do it and concludes with: " … you have a certain responsibility to canoeing , and I would like you to consider the effects, all possibilities, that a trip of this nature could have on the sport". I also have a copy of 'The Paddler' magazine from 1982, produced by the Irish Canoe Union, which refers in an article to my trip having caused "… a storm of controversy".

[6] The three Jersey paddlers were Franco Ferrero, Derek Hairon and John Bouteloup. I met them in Donegal during their first circumnavigation in 1978 and I had extensive correspondence with Derek Hairon from Oct. 1978 to 1982. The quotes above in my original article are from Oct. '78 in which he also says: " … with grave reservations, we wish you luck – you will need it!". In a following letter in January 1979 he had softened a little: "Sorry if I sounded a bit harsh …." and gave a lot of practical advice. In a further letter in Feb. 1979 he said: "Franco still thinks you are a bit mad".

[77] The boat was a Nordkapp model – the first of the modern fibre-glass sea Kayaks and it went first went into production in 1975. I managed to get just a bare shell and glassed in bulkheads and fitted hatches myself. One hatch was screw-type and the other hand an aluminum lid secured by a lever. I also added declines etc and fitted a bilge-pump. I do not remember how or when I got this but I expect it was the spring of 1979, a few months before departure. I did do a good shake-down trip with a friend during the Easter holidays of 1979 that include a rounding of the Fastnet Rock, so I expect the Norkapp was ready at that stage.

weight camping equipment had to be put together. I had to learn some navigation and begin training. There was an endless list of things that had to be done and, on top of it all, came the Post Office strike and I was left with a seventy-mile round trip to my sister's house to use an automatic phone in order to make calls. There was no post either.[8]

One of my biggest headaches was the general incompetence and inefficiency of a number of firms that I was dealing with - "Sure Tom, we'll have that for you before you go, no problem". But a few short weeks before I was due to leave I had no boat, no suitable paddles, no charts, no tent, no flares. On many occasions I drove long distances to find that dealers hadn't various items in stock, even when they had assured me beforehand that they would. There was not enough time to do the necessary training, but I did a good deal of roadwork on the dark roads around North Cork and I did circuit training in the school gym.

The lack of adequate equipment prevented me from training much at sea but I paddled a lot on the lake in Killarney and spent a good while practicing rolling the boat in its cold waters. All this had to be done after a day's work or at weekends. I was writing cheques, hoping that I would be at sea before the bank manager 'copped on'.

When reading books or reports about other expeditions, it had always amazed me how the organisers were left with a last minute, frantic rush after months and even years of preparation. Well, now I understood. On June 3rd., which was my scheduled day for leaving, I was barely ready, even though I had no special food, much of the gear had been borrowed or bought second-hand and other items I could not get at all.

Would I be adequate?

During all the preparing and organising, my biggest worry was myself. The boat was good enough - the Eskimos had been using similar designs for hundreds of years and the particular model which I was using had been tried and tested many times. The trip was humanly possible - men had done far more demanding journeys. I was the big question mark: would I be adequate?

On the morning of my departure I drove back to Brandon, on the northern side of the Dingle peninsula, with Ann who was now in the middle of her exams and had other things to be worried about. I felt I had got my first break as the sun was shining and the sea calm: this pleased me for I knew that, during the trip, this would be the image that would stay in the minds of my family who had come to see me off. They had no real experience of the sea and this image of the sea would stay with them, I felt.

Jumble of emotion.

As I pushed off and waved goodbye to the family, Ann and a few friends, my mind was a jumble of emotion. The Maharee islands, only five miles away, were hidden by haze and, as I headed north on a compass bearing, my mind raced through what I was likely to face. How long could I hold out for? Would I get as far as the Aran Islands? Could I cope with the Atlantic on such a wild coast? So many things could go wrong which could leave me swimming, miles out. Perhaps my tremendous respect for the sea was the cause of many of my worries.

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[8] Google tells me that this strike lasted from Feb. 19th to June 25th – which meant I had no postal service or no local phones available for approximately 14 weeks before departure or during the first three weeks of the trip (local phones in rural areas had to be cranked up to connect with an 'operator' in the local post office; urban areas had dial phones that didn't need an operator).

Only cowardice kept me going – the dread of giving up at that point and loosing face was greater than my dread of the challenge. However, I was also sustained in my faith in the capabilities of the human body - my flesh and blood were the same as anybody else's and, as long as my mind endured, I would keep going.

Having left Brandon in poor visibility, the first stop in my pre-arranged plan was east of Loop Head, across the Shannon Estuary and 24 miles to the north. Even though I had planned to do around 24 nautical miles per day, I had expected that it would take some time for my body to adjust itself and that I wouldn't make very great progress for a week or so. Now, a pain in my back, as well as a general feeling of uneasiness, decided me to head for Kerry Head on the southern side of the Shannon Estuary. My first campsite was pretty typical of many which were to come - the tent pitched on rocky ground a few feet above the high-water mark, in a little cove which was not marked on neither Admiralty charts nor Ordnance Survey maps.

Psychological Barriers

I couldn't take my eyes away from the dirty snout of Loop Head, which stuck out of the mist, as I paddled across the estuary the following morning in a choppy, force 3 sea. Loop Head was one of a few places which had become big psychological barriers for me. Nothing I had heard or read about it was good. The group from Jersey, which rounded it in a force 7 the previous year, wrote ". . . . communications at this point became impossible while we concentrated on holding on to our paddles and staying upright. There would be no stopping, no 'rafts' and no rescues here . . ." Another group from Scotland found the waves so steep that they had to brake the boats when sliding into the troughs to prevent them from looping.

Weather Moderate.

Even though the wind was moderate, I had to concentrate fully on the dirty, confused chop and the place had an eerie atmosphere of isolation and exposure. However, I was soon past it and tiredness forced me to land soon after near the Bridges of Ross in Co. Clare. After just two days paddling, my body ached all over and a simple thing like lifting my hand to my head sent pain shooting up my arm.

Last Glimpse of Kerry

I woke up on my third morning just in time to hear Mike Murphy[9] making some wisecrack about the shipping forecast, which I had just missed on the radio. After puking up my breakfast[10], I set out into the dirty sea, passing Kilkee, and landed on Mutton Island for a brief rest. From a little hill here, I got a last glimpse of Kerry and a feeling of satisfaction with what I had achieved. To the north I could get brief views of the jagged peaks of the Twelve Pins, reminding me that I must keep looking ahead and not back. I had hoped to get to Hag's Head from Mutton Island, which would have put me in a good position for a crossing to the Aran Islands, but the worsening weather, tiredness and the persuasive clout of a green wave which almost capsized me, sent me heading in towards the southern side of Liscannor Bay. The immediate problem was trying to find a place to land on the stony, surf-swept beach, but I eventually found one sheltered by a reef and began another laborious haul with the boat, up the loose shingle.

[9] A popular morning radio show presenter.

[10] I will refer further to food and nutrition, but I gradually fell into a pattern of eating very little, or sometimes nothing, in the morning.

Unpleasant Location
As the sea was full of large breaking waves coming from the north-west the next day, and I was in need of a rest, I spent my first rest-day in this unpleasant spot full of tar-oil and covered with rotting seaweed that was crawling with insects. Anybody who could have seen me there would surely have pitied me, lying on a bed of stones covered with a slim sleeping-mat and with my inflated lifejacket as a pillow, and fully clothed to keep warm even though I was in my sleeping bag. The rain spattering on the billowing tent, combined with the pounding of the sea a few feet below, to give a wild, desolate sound.

Yet, I was happy and content. I was warm and had plenty of food after stocking up in Miltown Malbay. I had cigarettes, a book and my radio. I was finding comfort in my isolation. I also experienced that strange feeling of wellbeing that accompanies a body sore after physical exercise. My left fist wouldn't fully close but I had made good progress the previous day and I felt that my condition had not stopped deteriorating and I was beginning to get strong[11]. I was beginning to adapt to my primitive lifestyle, dominated by the basic needs of safety, food, shelter and warmth.

Body Weakness
Thursday, the 7th of June, saw another big step: the Aran Islands had come and gone. The crossing to Gregory Sound between lnismore and lnismaan had been pleasant, but my mind could never get away from the realization that had anything went wrong on the crossing, I had the Cliffs of Moher to my right and America on my left!

At the Aran Islands I decided to risk the six-mile crossing to Gorumna Island on the Northern side of Galway Bay that evening. The main risk on that spot, on that day, was not wind or sea or tide, but the relative weakness of my own body which was still far from being fit. Exhaustion leads to errors of judgement and mistakes, and you lack that extra reserve which might be needed to get out of trouble. My still weak state was illustrated when the straightforward, six-mile crossing, took three hours, giving a speed of only two knots. The average cruising speed of my boat was around three-and-a-half knots.

Food Scarcity
Gorumna Island, on the southern shore of Connemara, was a pleasant spot one of those few places where a third-generation American's concept of rural Ireland still exists in reality. I was becoming worried about the trip from here to Achill which was at least three days ahead. The coast to the north was very isolated and I faced the prospect of running short of food. My meal for that day consisted of leftovers: a ‘stew’ of raisins, soup, Alpen, cheese, apple and curry sauce[12]. If the weather broke, I could easily find myself isolated on an island for a few days. I was due to make my weekly call to Marine Rescue[13] who would pass on my whereabouts to my family, via the local Gardai[14]. My family must be anxious at this stage but, even if I could find a

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[11] Reflecting back from the perspective of years spent training for high-performance masters cycling during my 50s and 60s – and also from coaching cyclists to a very high level – I was woefully underprepared from the physiological perspective.
[12] I carried a little freeze-dried food – which was terrible – but I mainly sourced what I could along the way and it was sometimes scarce.
[13] I had no radio (apart from a ‘transistor radio’ to get the shipping forecast) or any other form of communication. I had arranged a weekly call to Marine Rescue. There was no Coast Guard in the Republic then.
[14] Irish police force.

telephone, there was no hope of getting through due to the post office strike. I had also hoped to meet Ann in Achill Island and wanted her to know when I would reach there.

Dangerous Hops
The logistics of planning a route to Achill were typical of much of the coast. Moving into bays would delay me enormously but the decision to keep out meant that 'hops' had to be made between islands and headlands, thus involving greater commitment and danger. You either reach an island or you don't. If you get tired or sick, or if the wind strengthens or equipment fails, you just can't pull in or stop. Generally, I took a destination which I wanted to reach in four or five day's time, and planned back from that, trying to figure out what journeys I could make each day to reach that destination.

Lucky Let-Off

I was now getting used to getting into my wet canoeing clothes each morning (consisting of an old jumper, tracksuit bottoms and wolly socks). I felt particularly tired as I left Gorumna for Slyne Head and the expedition almost ended when I stopped to rest and explore a little on an island while taking a break. Coming back to the spot where I had left the boat, I saw that it was gone and the rocks where it had been left were covered by the rising tide! Incredibly, I found it stuck on a solitary rock, which was the only thing that kept the boat from going on its merry way towards America before the easterly wind. I had almost become a Robinson Crusoe, but a chest deep wade retrieved the boat and I was off again, leaving the Twelve Pins to my right.

Mind Wandering
Being alone for eight or nine hours, sitting in one position and travelling at three knots, it was difficult to concentrate and the mind invariably wandered. About three miles from Slyne Head, I felt that I just couldn't continue for another hour and decided to pull in, but found that the leeway had left me some miles off-shore. As was to happen a few times, I had to put in that hard, sustained effort to get ashore against wind and waves.

I walked a few miles to the Connemara Golf Club that evening for a drink and food and was fortunate enough to meet a Garda, who promised to get a message to Marine Rescue, giving my position and my expected day of arrival in Achill. This would be passed on to by phone to my sister in Killarney who, in turn, would drive 11 miles to my parents' house to let them know where I was. Such was the nature of communication.

Passing between the twin towers of Slyne Head and the mainland the next day, I ran into steep choppy waves created by the north-going tide running into the south-going wind and waves. This set a pattern for the rest of the day - a long hard struggle against a cold drenching sea. In a kayak, the large rolling swells present no problem, but the small, short chop sends the low boat bucking and jumping and throws spray everywhere. Many hours later, as I approached lnnisturk, the tide turned to join the opposing force of the wind and, again, the last few miles became a bitter struggle to reach land.

"I suppose you never saw a boat like that before", I said to a few locals that I chatted to on the pier, expecting them to have great interest in my strange craft. "Yera, there were three of them here last year and a couple of more a few weeks later", one replied. On the west coast, I landed at least five times in the same spot as one or other of the previous expeditions the year before. This illustrates the 'stepping stone' nature of the trip. An hour later I retired to my sleeping bag, in my

clothes which had gotten wet from a shower while I was putting up the tent, and my exhausted sleep was only interrupted once or twice by the sound of the rising tide coming dangerously close to the tent.

Rugged Coastline

The 12-mile paddle to Achill on Sunday, the 9th of June, was done on a beautiful calm, sunny day. As I passed the castle of Grace O'Malley on Clare Island, I thought of how this western coastline lived up to its reputation. In all the distance I had traveled from Kerry, there were few places where a sailor could take a large vessel in trouble and even these were guarded by dangerous offshore reefs and rocks. The suitability of the kayak in this environment was equally evident, as it could be taken where no other vessel could venture and could be landed almost anywhere.

I went into the village in Achill Sound to look for Ann, after having quickly put up the tent, but failed to find her. Walking back to the campsite, after I had been resigned to her not coming, I came upon the strange sight of a tent pitched on water! It dawned on me, rather slowly, that this was my tent! I had been caught out by the high spring tide. As I made my way hurriedly down the road, at least half-a-dozen locals went out of their way to point out to me that my tent was under water. But it hadn't occurred to any of them to move it. I was extremely lucky that I hadn't followed my usual routine of laying out my sleeping bag, radio, books, clock and food, immediately after landing, and wet canvas was my only problem. Fortunately the boat was pulled up a little higher.

Later on, Ann showed up and I spent the following day taking a long much-needed rest, mending gear and stocking up with food.

On Tuesday morning, the I2th of June, my morale reached its lowest point of the whole trip. As I watched Ann leaving to hitch home, a great wave of loneliness swept over me. I had only been paddling for nine days and it had been tough, without the conditions having been too bad. I found it hard to cope with the prospect of continuing indefinitely. Soon, I noticed that the tide was turning and I set out to sea again.

The strong tide pushed me up Achill Sound into Blacksod Bay, where a northerly wind sprang up again. I pulled in near Ballyross with darkness coming on, having failed to reach my target of Portacloy on the north-Mayo coast. "No problem", I thought, "I'll be able to pick up the few extra miles tomorrow". Morale was still low and for the first time I erected the tent inner, under the flysheet, wondering how I had managed without it for so long.

Disorientation

After only two hours at sea the next day, I threw in the towel. It was a calm day but I felt strangely disorientated and the nagging, sometimes severe pain, which I had almost constantly in my neck, shoulders and back, were worse than usual. I pulled into a little harbour, strangely full of half-deckers, put up the tent and fell fast asleep. The name of the place was Porturlin and for the next two days I had a most enjoyable stay here, while a force 8 storm raged outside. I spent long hours chatting with the fishermen - we had a mutual interest in each other’s seagoing craft and experiences. Also, for the first time, I didn't feel like an intruder in a small community. They took me for what I was, no more and no less.

Hard Man
Before the expedition began, I had been getting the 'hard man' bit to such an extent that it had become a joke amongst my friends, but when one of the Porturlin fishermen who earned his living in small, open boat came up to me and said: "By God, but you're a hard man", I took it as a real tribute and it made me very proud. During the course of the trip, perhaps half a dozen older men, who had spent the greater part of their lives at sea, went out of their way to shake my hand and talk to me with appreciation for what I was doing, and this meant more to me than all the other tributes that I could ever get from yachtsmen or canoeists.

The I6th of June brought me to Easky, just east of Kilalla Bay, which put me in a good position for the longest crossing I would have to make so far - 24 miles north across Donegal Bay. I set out on this journey with a slight headache after spending the night before in a local hostelry with an English surfer. The sheer cliffs of Slieve league, which rise almost 2,000 feet out of the sea at the far side, seemed to be within touching distance all day but, for hour after long hour, they never appeared to come any closer.

I was delighted when I eventually set foot in Donegal. Before I left Kerry, I had said to myself so often, "if I could only get as far as Donegal". I had spent two months in Donegal the previous summer and had grown to like its gentle, soft-spoken people. It was an idyllic evening, one of those summer evenings about which you dream during the long winter, and you doubt whether they really exist or whether they appear in your imagination in response to the never-ending dullness of an Irish winter. But this one did exist: dull sunshine and a warm, gentle breeze; the setting sun forming long shadows of the trees and hills; grey turf-smoke rising from cottages; dogs barking clearly miles away.

Insect Surrender
I intended to be in bed for 9.30 PM and be refreshed for a two-day paddle to Falcarragh where I had some friends, but it didn't work out like that at all. Up along the coast I had made the acquaintance of a strange little insect about whom I was getting slightly neurotic. He was like a little grey beetle who made a clicking noise every time he hopped around and I called him the 'grasshopper beetle'. As soon as I got into my sleeping bag, such insects began to emerge from beneath the stones but I ignored them and tried to sleep. They had other ideas. I listened to them skipping around, banging off the flysheet and, every time I was about to doze off, one landed on my face. I killed dozens of them but they kept sending up reinforcements and, at midnight, I surrendered, dragging my sleeping bag and carry-mat out to the long, damp dew-soaked grass and, eventually, fell asleep under a bright, starry sky.

At 4 A.M. the next morning, I awoke with another problem. A swarm of midges was about my head, bent, it seemed, on digesting me alive. I tried crawling into the sleeping bag but they persisted. It became unbearable and, as I fought a rearguard action back to the tent, they attacked the rest of my body. I think it was Plato who said that scratching is the lowest form of pleasure, but I sat in the tent for a good half an hour, scratching away and big red lumps rising everywhere I had been bitten.

I awoke at I0 A.M. next morning, surprisingly refreshed, and had an uneventful journey to Crohy, near Aranmore Island, and passing the scene of some recent tragedies at Rathlin O'Byrne.

I was intrigued by the line of watch-towers dating from the Napoleonic Wars, and smaller, less elegant ones, from the last war, which extended the whole length of the coast. It is ironic that today, with so much exploitation of the sea for leisure and commercial reasons, we have no coast-watching service even though during at least two periods of our history we had very efficient ones.

Dangerous Shoals

From Aranmore, the next day, I headed straight for Bloody Foreland in a typical large, rolling Atlantic swell, but a fisherman went out of his way to warn me of dangerous water breaking over shoals on my route. I took his advice and changed course to skirt up along the side of Gola Island. The fair, streaked sides of Errigal came into view and it reminded me of a cold wet night I had spent on its slopes, just a year previously. I looked forward with great anticipation at rounding Bloody Foreland and seeing the familiar waters around lnisbofin and Tory Islands. I made a navigational error and arriving at what I thought was Bloody Foreland, realized that I had three more miles to go. This kind of realisation breaks your spirit and this, combined with a hard struggle against a turning tide up lnisbofin sound and into Ballyness Bay, left me exhausted when I reached land. A friend, whom I met soon after, later told me that I had a far-away, starry look in my eyes and was not quite in touch with what was going on around me.

Danger Ahead

But I was happy, I was amongst friends and felt at home. I had achieved my first big step – reaching Donegal! The experiences of this stage alone, fully lived up to what I had foreseen, and provided the thrills, adventure and mental and physical challenges that I had expected. I felt confident about what was to come and looked forward to setting out again after a day's rest. If, at that stage I could have had a premonition that the next leg of my journey would see me miles off the Donegal coast in a boat slowly filling with water from a leaking hull, I no doubt would have taken the decision to pack up and go home.

Ballyness is a bay in north-west Donegal, covering an area of about three square miles. Its mouth is just a small breach, perhaps twenty yards wide, so that when the tide is ebbing all the water of the bay is forced through the gap and causes a galloping current to flow out to sea. When the swell is coming against this current, big breaking waves are caused in the outgoing rip. It is a place much respected by local fishermen. On Saturday, the 23rd June, I was heading out of Ballyness, being swept along by the rushing current into an apparently calm sea with gently-braking waves further out. In minutes, however, I was in the midst of the threatening waves outside with the outgoing rip piling up the seemingly gentle swell. They became very big as I was swept out: the out-going tide steepened them into vertical walls of water which then collapsed under their own weight to become powerful roaring masses of white spray.

Pull yourself together!

It was one of those situations where I had said to myself, "Come on, now, Daly, pull yourself together and concentrate, one mistake and you are a gonner". It took all my experience of surf, and all the acquired fitness, to get through the white walls of water. If you lose momentum and the boat doesn't burst through, the wave will pick you up and toss the boat back like a twig in a mountain torrent. In a matter of minutes, probably even less, I was out of it, my heart settled

down to its normal rate, and I headed north hoping to make Lough Swilly that evening.[15] The sea was disturbed enough to keep me awake and alert without being concerned, but as the day wore on, it became increasingly evident that the boat was not handling properly. It was almost impossible to steer it and it appeared to weigh a ton.

That sinking feeling

As the bow settled lower and lower, I realised that it was taking in water, and a lot of it too! I wasn't alarmed at first – the sea was benign enough – and I was more curious as to the location of the leak and what caused it. My potentially dangerous position only dawned on me slowly and, while my immediate concern was to get to the shore, two miles away, before having to bail out, the prospect of not being able to do a repair and being grounded on this remote coastline worried me more.

I picked out a beach (which luckily was there) and headed towards it, frequently dodging the waves breaking over the usual shoals. These had given me nasty frights every now and then but it was a much more nerve-wracking situation dealing with a boat that was slow and sluggish, and very hard to get moving. Reaching a bit of beach, I found, to my horror, a six-inch gash under the bow, wide enough to put your fingers through.

The continual abrasion of rock on the fibre-glass, while dragging the boat up and down rocky shorelines, had finally taken its toll and I felt an utter fool for not having anticipated the problem and checked it.[16] It was only an air-pocket, formed by the sealed deck, that prevented the boat from becoming flooded more quickly. Much of my gear was soaked. The cargo space is divided into bow and stern watertight compartments, separated from the cockpit by watertight bulk-heads and accessible through hatches on deck. As I dragged out the dripping gear, it became evident that, in a way I was lucky, as my clock, radio, books, film and other things, which could have been damaged by salt water, were in the stern compartment. Even my basic emergency repair kit was dry also.

A place of good luck

I had never been very good at repairs, but this job was made more difficult by the lack of facilities and tools, along with my own lack of dry clothes to wear. It would have been a good excuse to give up but the thought never entered my head. I approached the job with the same care and preparation that a brain surgeon would approach an operation. The area around the hole was thoroughly dried with my paraffin stove, the tent was erected in case of rain and the instructions were read and re-read a dozen times. The eventual patch of fibre-glass resin and matting was crude but successful.

Later that evening, an old fisherman - his face bearing the signs of the years of exposure to the weather - came and took all my wet clothes away to dry them. He told me stories: old stories of men lost at sea, stories of wreckage from torpedoed ships coming ashore during two wars, the story of three canoeists who were blown into the same place a year before and the story of the Brendan, on its way to America, landing an injured sailor nearby the year before that again. At

[15] I had a water-bottle tethered on deck but it was swept away in this episode and I never replaced it. This meant that I drank noting at sea all day for the remainder of the trip. This was a mistake of course and surely effected performance.

[16] I had been getting water in the front compartment for some time but thought it had been leaking from the cockpit, through my home-made bulkhead. I don't know why the gash opened so much that day. I had a fibre-glass repair kit on board.

first I thought the place had bad luck seeing that in three successive years, people had landed there in trouble but later it occurred to me that it was a place of good luck in the sense that it had been available to those of us who needed a safe landing place in time of trouble.

My first good laugh

What could have been the end of the trip, hardly delayed me at all and the next day I come to Malin Head, passing over water that changed from bright blue to dark grey and all the other shades of the sea, as the different clouds passed over on their journey eastwards. Reaching Malin Head was the first time that I was really elated and it provided the same sensation that one gets when reaching the summit of a high mountain after an arduous struggle. The wind and tide pushed me along nicely as I headed south for the first time and I travelled 32 miles that day, more than making up for the time I had lost on account of the holed hull.

During the final few miles, I came upon a sleeping seal, his face just above the water. I sneaked up to within a few feet of him and just said, "Hello there, seal". The sleepy look on his face turned to consternation as he opened his eyes and dropped like a stone. I had my first good laugh at sea.

The lighthouse keeper at lnisowen Head took me to see the beacon and from the top of the tower and the Scottish coast was very near. Closer still was the treacherous Rathlin Sound, which frequently has eight and nine knot currents, along with violent overfalls. I was looking forward with nervousness to venturing into the North of Ireland[17] and was feeling ashamed that my ignorance and the influence of the sensation-seeking media was making me afraid of ordinary people just like myself.

I was up at 5 A.M. next morning to catch the tide crossing Lough Foyle and the move from warm sleeping bag to cold, drenched canoeing gear was agony in the cold dawn light. It rained heavily on the way across and the gloomy, cloud-covered appearance of the North contrasted sharply with the sun-drenched hills of the Republic. I hoped it wasn't an omen.

Feeling of Security

The orange, box-like structures of the Coast-Guard stations were new features on the coast and passing Bangor it gave a great feeling of security to have one nearby while I struggled through a dirty overfall which I had blundered into. If it had happened on the west coast it would have been a more frightening experience but I knew that the first sign of trouble here would bring immediate help and I took a vain pleasure in showing off my skills to the coastguard personnel whom I knew would be watching.

The Giant's Causeway went by almost unnoticed for things take on a different perspective from the sea, but the bold cliffs of the Antrim coastline were the most pleasing I had come across yet. It was now the 25th of June and the sea swarmed with new life. The prospect of the currents in Rathlin Sound terrified me, for they sometimes travelled at more than twice my top speed. Even though I was hurrying to sneak into Ballycastle during slack water, I couldn't avoid stopping to

[17] The 'Troubles' were at their height in Northern Ireland at this point and sectarian murders were common – there was a sense that one should avoid 'being in the wrong place at the wrong time'.

watch young seagulls being schooled in the art of flight. One by one they stepped out from their narrow perches into the up-draughts, then soared out and up and dropped back again without a flutter of their wings. It was a well conducted class and the young birds appeared to be excited and proud as they showed off their new skills. I didn't beat the tide and it was another long pull into Ballycastle.

The original Billy Bunter

I had intended to keep a low profile while in Northern Ireland but my first campsite there was a little more conspicuous than I would have liked - the tent pitched on the sand dune just beside the main road with every Tom, Dick, and Harry passing by. The place had its compensations, however, such as dial-telephones and I was able to beat the post office strike and ring a cousin - my first verbal contact with home in almost a month. It was great to be able to talk for a while but it left me afterwards with an even greater feeling of isolation and distance from home. I also rang Marine Rescue in Shannon and contacted the local UK coastguard to let them know what I was up to. While trying to explain what I was doing over the phone I got the distinct impression that the person behind the very British voice at the other end was listening to the latest Paddy joke: “It doesn’t really concern us” he said, “but the RUC or the military would probably like to hear from you”. ‘No thanks’, I said to myself as I hung up[18] and headed towards the nearest café where the Chinese waitress must have thought I was the original Billy Bunter.

Some of my special dehydrated food had been waiting for me in Donegal and as the difficulties in getting this is worth telling as it was fairly typical of the problems encountered in preparing the expedition. The postal strike had been in progress for some time someone gave me the address of an English company who could supply the freeze-dried food I needed. First, I did my usual seventy-mile round trip to my sister's house for the use of an automatic phone. From there, the message was phoned to a contact in an office in Dublin who, in turn, passed it on to contacts in Armagh in Norther Ireland. The order was typed up there and posted to England. The brochure arrived back to Armagh by post, was driven to Dublin where my uncle braved the fury of picketing Post Office strikers at the Fastrack office[19] and it then arrived by train to Killarney where I did another seventy-mile journey to collect it. A friend working in a bank then sent the order-form and bank-draft secretly, through the bank courier service, to a branch in England, along with a plea to post the envelope when it arrived.

After I began the trip, my brother-in-law was left with the problem of getting the packages from England and delivering them to me. While all this was going on, I was still trying to get other essential bits and pieces of equipment across, including a new and untried foot-pump which had just reached the market.

The best steps – bloody great long ones!

I expected every footstep that passed my tent during my first night in the Northern Ireland to stop just outside and I was ready for the unexpected: it was my first stop where there was a good deal of footfall near the tent. What worried me most was that the boat would be interfered with or something taken during the night. I pulled it up beside the tent, tied a rope to it, passed it in under the flysheet and attached it to the paddle beside my sleeping bag. I slept with my arm over the paddle that night so that if the boat were moved I would be awake instantly and the spare

[18] The RUC police force (Royal Ulster Constabulary) were viewed as sectarian with some justification and my accent would immediately identify me as from ‘the South’ with the presumption of being a Republican and a Catholic.

[19] A rail-based package/courier service.

paddle was at the other side if I needed a weapon. There is no doubt that isolation and solitude, combined with a constant state of nervous tension, can adversely effect the mind and stimulate the imagination.

I was on the water before eight again the next day and crept out of Rathlin Sound between tides. After rounding Fair Head I was happy that I was finished with the dangerous tide-races but, an hour later off Torr Head, I got caught in an amazing tangle of currents. It occurred about a mile offshore where I was trying to avoid eddies and feeling that the best steps to take in the situation were 'bloody great long ones' and I set out for the shore. It was more like river canoeing as the bow swung through I80 degrees when it passed from one current to another one going in the opposite direction. It would not have been a pleasant place an hour later when the tide was flowing fully, or in bad weather. It was a dull, cold day with a quartering wind, which made the boat difficult to handle and necessitated the use of right-hand sweep-strokes for most of the day.

Sailing backwards!

Between waiting for late weather forecasts and getting up early to catch the tides, the night of Wednesday, the 20th June, was the third consecutive night during which I had less than five hours sleep. However, I reached the southern side of Belfast Lough that evening. It had been another long, cold day, and punching headwinds which slowed me down so that, yet again, I had failed to make a landfall before the tide turned. Tides are important to sea canoeists - if you are opposed by a relatively weak two-knot current, your effective speed may be reduced to one knot, and it takes a long time to get anywhere at that speed. Such was the case that evening and a large yacht with a lot of sail which was trying to go south was actually moving backwards while I crawled in closer to land.

Becoming casual and careless

I sat down that evening and looked at a small map of Ireland and the different stages I had taken so far. It startled me when I looked at my longest day's paddle - from Lough Swilly to Lough Foyle. In comparison with the entire trip, it was so short and so insignificant that it appeared to have made no difference at all. The short line around the Inishowen peninsula seemed to have left me in the same place, more or less. It started a train of thought and I had a long chat with myself.

The half-way stage had now arrived and I needed to re-appraise the whole trip. I was becoming a bit casual and careless. The days just passed by, one after the other, and I realized that my mind had installed a safety valve in that I quickly forgot about dangerous situations and they didn't bother me afterwards. That evening, for example, if the tide had been a little stronger, if I was a little weaker, I could easily have been pushed back out to sea and have been in serious trouble. But that didn't occur to me, so I wasn't deterred.

The best and the worst yet to come!

It had been 25 days since I had left Kerry and I was half-way around Ireland - a feat that was only a crazy man's dream when I left. I had been through much and the prospect of facing as much again was daunting. In a way too, I was a little sad - I was finished with the west coast and the experiences that I encountered there were gone forever and would grow progressively more faint in my memory. My abiding memories of the Atlantic were of small deserted islands, the big

Atlantic swell breaking dangerously over reefs, and the kind, gentle people isolated at the western extremity of the Old World.[20]

Yet, the best and worst were yet to come. The best in that I was to overcome tremendous physical and mental barriers, and the worst, in that the elements, which had been relatively kind up to now, were to throw a mixture of trouble at me from then on. I was now two days into fairly regular and fresh southerly and south-westerly winds and these conditions were to contribute to a difficult passage down the east coast to the point where I experienced a dizzy spell on the water before I reached Dublin.

When dizziness take control

It was now almost the end of June - Friday, the 29th, in fact. As I was coming in to land at high tide on the south side of Belfast Lough, I had realised that the ground was sloping very gently out to sea and I would have a lot of dry ground to cover when launching again at low tide. At that stage however, I wasn't going to go fooling around looking for some place better. I was afraid that the tide and strong wind might have pushed me back into Belfast Lough and, anyway, I was so tired that I would, like St. Brendan, have landed on a whale's back if one had been available.

The more hurry the less speed

I was dubious about putting to sea next morning. I had overslept until 6.45 a.m. and missing the morning weather forecast, but the one at midnight beforehand had predicted an offshore force 4 to 6, gusting to 7. I spent a few dopey minutes in the sleeping-bag debating whether to go or not, and then sprang into action in order to get as much of the tide as possible, but ‘the more hurry the less speed’!

I lit the paraffin stove and then spilt water over it. I lit it again and it ran out of oil. Eventually, I had a good breakfast of boiled eggs, brown bread, cheese and tea. In my eating habits, as in other respects, I was becoming more and more like a wild animal in that my main food intake came mainly from one large meal in the day. Usually, breakfast was light, often only a cup of tea, and if the day was calm enough I might have a bit of chocolate at sea. In the evening I would gorge myself with all sorts of strange and varied concoctions – whatever I had on hand.

After the the long haul down to the water I encountered some of the strongest winds so far on that day. The seas weren't big, as they were coming from the west, but I had a constant spray of cold water coming from the small waves smashing against the hull. Apart from being blown out to sea, the greatest danger in wind like this lies in the possibility of the wide blade of the paddle being snatched by the wind and capsizing the boat. Away to the south, vicious-looking rain squalls were crossing the Irish Sea towards England, with their menacing-looking black clouds extending from the sky into the sea.

Major dilemma

The day passed rather quickly and I felt guilty about coming ashore after only six hours: at this stage I was normally staying on the water for anything up to nine hours and 10 was not uncommon. At the same time I was feeling satisfied at having achieved so much under the prevailing conditions.

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[20] I remember also that the challenge went out of the expedition to some extent during this period: I realized that ‘I can do this’ – I can keep going indefinitely and it was now only a matter of avoiding accidents.

I was in a major dilemma that evening: I was almost out of cigarettes (one of my major sources of companionship) and I was camped in ‘the middle of nowhere’. I had no intentions of asking directions to a shop or pub as I was still in Norther Ireland and wasn't quite sure what the reaction would be to a rather bedraggled looking man, with a very southern accent, who hadn't had a bath or shower in almost a month, and whose only set of clothes hadn't been washed in that time either.

That night was cold and uncomfortable, in a damp sleeping bag on bumpy ground. The next morning I was up at 6.30 again. When I looked out and saw the calm sea and bright, early morning sunshine, it struck me how bad and miserable the weather had been all along. I hadn't seen a calm sea like that since away down the west coast.

For an hour I sped down the coast, the only sound coming from the blades entering and leaving the sea and the sharp bow slicing neatly through the water. It was an exhilarating morning. Speed is a relative thing and the movement of the boat on flat water, combined with the flow of the tide, gave me an overall speed of 6 knots: it felt like doing 80 in a car. I admired the boat cutting the water: it was a beautiful craft - elegant, shapely and graceful, with its origins going back thousands of years.

Popular misconception

Many people are confused between the term canoe and kayak. Strictly speaking, kayaks are boats with covered decks, in which the crew sit and use a double-bladed paddle. The craft is mostly associated with the cold northern waters and there are hundreds of different varieties. The canoe, on the other hand, is an open boat in which the crew kneels and use a single bladed paddle. It is popularly associated with the Northern American Indian but had many varieties throughout the world, ranging from the small papyrus boats of the Polynesian Islands to the dug-out canoes of prehistoric Irishmen. Today, these definitions are no longer adequate and a modern closed-deck boat designed for use on fast rivers, could no more be called a kayak than a board-sailor could be called a yacht.

Generally speaking, boats that are especially designed and used for work on the sea are called kayaks. My boat, unlike its wood-framed and seal-skinned predecessors, was built of glass-fibre and mass-produced. It takes its basic design from the native West Greenland Kayak and was first tested in 1975 during a British expedition along 500 miles of Norwegian coastline to the North Cape - Europe's most northerly point – and hence the trade-name of the boat - Nordkapp. It had been proven many times since then in expeditions at the Aleutian Islands, Newfoundland, New Zealand, round Cape Horn and others. There are now about thirty sea-kayaks in the Republic.

Vital statistics

One of the things, which I tried to impress upon people about my trip, was that it was not a gimmicky, hair-brained adventure, but a serious expedition being carried out in a genuine sea-going craft that had many advantages over conventional vessels. What frightened people most was its size. It had an overall length of I7½ feet, but is less than 20 inches wide. While this made it so unstable that an inexperienced person would have difficulty in staying upright, even in perfectly flat water, it also made it very fast and it fitted the paddler's hips and knees like a

glove. This is important for control. It weighed 60 lbs. when empty and perhaps three times that when laden.

Watertight bulkheads

The boat's most pleasing features were the high, pointed bow and stern which ensured that the boat maintained directional stability and surfaced quickly when waves broke over it. In the centre, the paddler sat in the cockpit, which was entered through an opening barely large enough to squeeze through and this was sealed by a 'spray-deck' – an apron-like piece of waterproof material which was stretched around the edge of the cockpit.

Fore and aft of the cockpit, two watertight bulkheads kept the water out of the bow and stern compartments, which stored all necessitates for a two-month, self-sufficient stay away from home. Access to these was through watertight hatches on deck. Apart from the hatches, the deck appeared to be cluttered with paraphernalia. The rear deck was dominated by a split paddle, which would be easily whipped off and joined if the other one were lost or broken.

A bilge- pump lay flush with the deck, just behind the cockpit. This was for emergency use if I was out of the boat and the cockpit was flooded. It's practical use in an emergency is questionable. Beside it was a neatly coiled line, which I connected to my life jacket with a snap-link whenever conditions were dicey: if it came to getting out of the cockpit I didn't want to lose contact with the boat.

The first item forward of the cockpit on the front deck was the appropriate chart. These were photocopies of the real thing, waterproofed with clear contact and attached to the deck with elastic cords.[21] Various bearings, landfalls, dangers and 'escape routes' were marked on the chart with waterproof marker the previous evening.

Beyond the chart was a compass, and beyond that again, an assortment of flares, sealed in home-made, waterproof containers, made up from plumber's waste-pipe.[22]

Prolonging the agony

Inside the cockpit, I had a small invaluable foot pump, worked by foot. to deal with seepages. The tent poles, charts, and other long odds-and-ends, lived in a glass-fibre tunnel that I had added to the the underside of the deck, between my knees. Included in these was a large plastic sack that I intended to get into if I found myself in the water and this should act as a wet-suit and might postpone exposure for a little while. Some people believed it would only prolong the inevitable: indeed, some of the top British sea-canoeists have the same attitude about life-jackets that old fishermen have about swimming. Many don't wear lifejackets believing that if conditions get so bad they are forced into the water, death is inevitable anyway and there is no point in prolonging it. Behind my back, between the seat and rear bulkhead, was stuffed the tent and sleeping bag.

The next most important item was the paddle. Its loom was made of hollow glass-fibre and the blades from laminated wood. While being very light, it was extremely strong. This had been

[21] These were laminated photocopies of Admiralty Charts that I had got from the paddlers from Jersey who had done the first circumnavigation the year before.

[22] I had made these up myself, with screw caps in the ends. After the trip, when I was sorting out my gear, I couldn't open these by hand to retrieve the flares and had to get a large spanner.

bought second-hand and had previously been used on an Irish Sea crossing. The boat could be bought over the counter for around £250 but this would be the same as going into your local showroom and buying a Ford Escort for the Circuit of Ireland Rally. The boat had to be rigged-out and perhaps twice as much spent again on all the other necessary gear.

Crabbing along

Within an hour, my day-dreaming about boats and the people who crewed them came to an end as the weather returned to its normal pattern – fresh westerly and south-westerly winds, accompanied by cold, wetting seas. I moved down the coast crabwise, the bow facing at an angle of 45 degrees towards the shore and the action of my paddling towards shore, and the wind pushing out, forced me in a tangent to the desired direction.[23]

I stopped at the lighthouse at St. John's Point for a piece of chocolate and my last cigarette before the ten-mile crossing of Dundrum Bay. The strong wind whistling through my wet clothes left me bitterly cold and, at the far side of a high wall, I could hear people speaking to each other. I would have given anything for a hot, steaming mug of tea, but I faced into the seemingly never-ending, 10-mile crossing with a wind that sometimes gusted to a dangerous level. Coming in to land a few miles South of Annalong that evening, I could see the seabed strewn with huge boulders for a hundred yards offshore. I knew what this meant - an hour's work next morning unpacking the boat, ferrying the gear down to the water's edge, then lifting the boat down over the boulders and packing everything again. But I didn't care - I was dog-tired and fed up.

An overall feeling of tiredness

At this stage, tiredness, bad weather and isolation from human contact were producing one of the low points of the trip. The right cheek of my backside was getting sore, and no wonder - I seemed to had lost quite a lot of weight and only a few millimetres of flesh separated the constantly moving bone from the hard seat.[24] My right shoulder was getting very painful from constant pressure being put on that side because of the nature of the waves being produced by the wind, and I was gradually being overtaken by an overall feeling of tiredness.

Things came to a head the next day. After having spent a good deal of time moving the gear and boat down to the water, I set off into the persistent head-winds, feeling tired and unwell. My shoulders began to hurt straight away and I wasn't out long at all when suddenly I became dizzy. I sat there wondering what was going to happen next. Will I pass out? Can I get a flare off in time? Will I rip off the spray deck now or wait till I hit the water? Will there be time to inflate the lifejacket.

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[23] This kind of sea condition could be difficult in the version of the Nordkapp that I had, making it difficult – sometimes very difficult – to handle when waves coming at an angle, especially when they were low and frequent as often occurred in strong offshore wind. The boat wanted to run parallel to the waves in these conditions, making it particularly difficult to make a steady course at an angle to the wavers, The Nordkapp didn't have a rudder option then and the keel remained prominent all the way to the stern made turning and I expect these features were part of the problem. I evolved techniques for managing this but it was a demanding and tiring scenario. One diary entry, illustrating this read " … a quartering wind that had me dong strong sweep strokes with an extended paddle on my right side, putting tremendous pressure on my shoulder all day."

[24] At some stage I glued some spare neoprene to the sides of the cockpit seat to make the fit more snug – I felt 'loose' in the boat from the weight drop. However, I don't remember when or how I got this done.

"Now", I thought, "All those people who had constantly warned you would feel smug if they saw you". "Whose going to help you if you get into trouble?" they had said over and over again. "What's going to happen if you get sea-sick or dizzy?"

My most dangerous move

It passed quickly enough and I moved cautiously towards the shore expecting the dizziness to return at any moment.[25] Logically, I should have come ashore and rested, but man isn't a logical being. Also, I was due to meet Ann and an uncle in Howth the following evening and spend two days with them. And I wanted to get out of Norther Ireland. So, I headed on, hugging the shore and passing Russell Point, Lee Stone Point, Cranfield Point, Ballagar Point, Cooley Point and Dunany Point. It would have been quicker going in a straight line but it was safer this way.

I passed Carlingford Lough and arrived at Cooley Point, the nearest crossing point of Dundalk Bay, without going in altogether. I set out across the bay, thinking that, with my tiredness and the offshore wind, it was my most risky move so far. However, my greatest fear - the rising, gusting wind - didn't materialize and I was more than glad to reach Clogherhead, and the Republic, that evening.

One of the main advantages of being alone was now becoming apparent. If a group of three or four paddlers had been under the same physical, mental and emotional stress as I had been during that period of time, each one would have preferred a different course of action. Tempers would have been short, levels of toleration would have been low, arguments would have blown up over the pettiest of things and the group might very easily have disintegrated.

Broken rules

The harbour at Clogherhead, despite its importance, has no slipway that I could find and one of the many Sunday trippers came along and helped me lift the boat over a steep, oily wall. He was a sailing enthusiast and invited me home for tea. Many people around the coast had offered me meals and beds and one of the great advantages of being alone is that people will communicate with you more than when you have company. I made it a rule, however, not to accept such offers as I thought it might break my stride and routine. Other groups had found that it became increasingly more difficult to face hard ground, rough food, dirt and dampness after experiencing home comforts during an expedition. I broke the rule at Clogberhead, partly because I needed some company after my silent journey through the North and I intended to spend two days in Dublin with all the home comforts. As my sailor friend drove me to his house, I was greatly struck by the lush green vegetation of the rich countryside and particularly by the tall and stately trees. The east coast was certainly different from what I had experienced in the previous few weeks.

Thrillseekers

I pulled into Howth the following evening and, despite my good intentions of doing a lot of repairing of gear, I took it easy for two days in my uncle's home and had time with Ann. I had my first bath in a month, washed all my clothes, after which they felt unrecognisable, but failed to sleep on a bed and had to resort to a sofa. I left Howth in good weather but it always took a while

[25] This was perhaps the most dangerous part of the trip and I don’t know what caused this bout. It might have been dehydration but this account says it was early in the day. As noted earlier, lack of adequate hydration and nutrition must have had a detrimental effect on the ability to perform.

to get into top gear after a few days' rest and I had only reached Bray Head by evening. My tent was on the site of an old bathing place, its crumbling ruins reflecting Bray's former role as an elegant and fashionable holiday resort. This was in comparison with its somewhat vulgar, hurdy-gurdy appearance of today. Later that evening a group of teenagers, in their uniforms of faded denims and boots, came down to where I was camped. They fooled around the boat and tent for a while, cracking jokes at my expense. Later they became menacing, then threatening. It took the sight of the seven-inch blade of a heavy diver's knife that I carried as a form of multi-tool – and which I casually produced for some made-up task – to encourage them to move on.

Highly motivated
It was the beginning of another period of head and offshore winds which culminated in a very difficult attempt to reach land, fighting westerly winds, into Rosslare on Sunday, July 8th. Since leaving Howth, I had lost a day off of my schedule because of the winds. I allowed myself 10 weeks to do the trip. I based this on the performance of the fastest previous group - which had taken almost eight weeks - and I allowed two weeks for extra stoppages. Even though I was now well ahead of schedule I never lost the urgency to keep moving and was continually afraid of the attempt losing momentum. For some reason, I remained highly motivated all of the time and this was perhaps responsible for some of the predicaments in which I found myself.

One of those days
That journey into Rosslare was just another one of 'those' days. It wasn't too bad until I came to Raven Pt., at the northern side of Wexford Harbour. The wind had been fresh and offshore but I kept in the shelter of the sand dunes along the coast and crawled along. At Raven Pt., I was standing on little more than a sandbank and faced with the prospect of either going back a few miles to find a suitable camping site, or going ahead, across Wexford Harbour with a menacing wind blowing out to sea. I got into the boat, against my better judgement, and set out towards Rosslare Pt.

Progress was slow, wet and painful. A yacht appeared, coming out of the harbour under motor. "He's attempting to come through a very narrow channel", I thought. At the far side of a sandbar I saw the top of his mast moving along when suddenly it stopped. "Good God", I said to myself "he's gone aground".

To the rescue
I paddled towards the sandbar thinking it funny that a kayak should be racing to a yacht in distress. However, after landing on the bar I pulled the boat up and ran to the top to see the yacht safely anchored 50 yards away in a channel.

Feeling utterly fed up, I tried to launch the boat again. I put it in a foot of water but by the time I was in, and the spray-deck secured, the wind had driven me aground again. This went on for about 10 minutes while I was getting more exasperated all the time. I noticed a seal looking in my direction and I could have sworn it was laughing at me. A torrent of expletives and profanities flowed in its direction but it didn't appear to notice, which maddened me even more.

After a bitter struggle against the wind and the waves I landed at Rosslare Pt., the nearest safe point across the harbour. I had landed here for a rest but it was unsuitable for camping, so I set out again towards the pier a few miles away. After landing in one other unsuitable place, I

eventually found a camping spot. Here I thankfully rested after an exhausting, nerve-racking day during which I had landed and launched the boat no less than five times.

Water speed record

I rested there for a day and on Tuesdav, the I0th of July, I left Rosslare, rounded Carnsore Pt., and was on the south coast. It was another big step and I hoped that the westerly and south-westerly winds which had been so consistent would take a break. As I rounded Carnsore Pt., the seals were sunning themselves and grunting and roaring to their hearts content. It reminded me of the previous Easter when a friend and I were attempting a crossing from Skull to Baltimore at night. A few miles out of Skull then, I heard, for the first time, the moan of a seal in a dark calm sea and I would probably have set up a new kayak water speed record back to shore if my friend hadn't reassured me.

Idyllic scene

I passed the Saltee Islands and Kilmore Quay and got a nice campsite near Fethard that evening. The memory of that night will be etched in my mind forever. I was camped on an isolated, rocky beach. In front of the open door of the tent, a brilliant full moon shone over the silhouetted outline of a Martello tower, and above this the puffy streaks of cloud looked like smudged, cotton-wool balls. At the foot of the little cliff under which I sheltered, the murmur of water lapping the shore contrasted with the more aggressive rumbling and hissing of waves breaking over rocks on the more exposed south-facing side. The lights of Kilmore Quay twinkled to my left, 10 miles away and, beyond that, the warning of the Tuskar Rock lighthouse intermittently swept the sky.

Formula for isolation

The following morning was just as beautiful and I paddled along in lovely sunshine and flat sea. Off Tramore I saw a rowing boat coming towards me about a mile out to sea and my curiosity was instantly aroused. I had read of a Connemara man who was to attempt a circumnavigation of Ireland by currach and thinking that it might be him and I set out to meet him. It turned out to be a 74 year old man out fishing!

As the beaches became more crowded and little communities more commercialised along the south coast, loneliness began to affect me more. If I pulled into a place with not a human soul about I was content, and if there were only two or three people in a place I was assured of company. But landing on a beach with hundreds of holiday-makers was a guaranteed formula for isolation.

Sheer horror

I left Bunmahon Bay the next morning and headed for Helvick Head on a bright but misty sea. I was only out for half-an-hour when I saw two black fins leisurely slicing the water in my direction, about 15 feet away. It was my first encounter with a shark. One reads occasionally of people's reactions on meeting sharks but the emotions I experienced then could not really be described. It was a feeling of surprise and amazement, accompanied by sheer horror. The fact that it was probably a basking shark, and harmless, didn't help in the slightest as a shark is a shark and the mere mention of the word causes a strong reaction. It swam towards me, passing within spitting distance and carried on for a few yards. Then it did a few quick turns, like a dog following its tail, and disappeared. It wouldn't have been so bad had I been in a bigger boat, but

when I was actually sitting on one level with the water, with my hands often going right into it, I felt very vulnerable.

With the morning fog and the distraction of the shark, I soon realised that I was going badly astray, heading into Dungarvan instead of towards Helvick Head. I had gone a few miles before I realised this and made a guess at a proper bearing. It took some willpower to head into what appeared to be limitless, fog-shrouded sea on a doubtful compass bearing. Later, I got a visual sighting. Towards evening, the wind became much stronger and I had an exhausting crawl into Knockadoon Head, with the tide racing up Capel Sound against me. I wondered would I ever get a nice day, with a fair wind rising, and the waves behind me instead of what appeared to be a constant fight into wind and drenching seas.

On Friday, I3th, I arose, feeling fed up, to a cold damp morning and set off into the wind again, feeling very tired after the struggle of the evening before. I picked up food from a friend near Roche's Point and crossed Cork Harbour with a dying wind.

Nothing will stop me now

I paddled away westward with the Old Head of Kinsale sticking out in front of me, going very slowly and feeling very tired. I arrived in Oysterhaven, intending to rest here for a day in preparation for the final lap home. I was getting more apprehensive and nervous with the journey coming to a close and all the mixed emotions and doubts that I felt before leaving home were beginning to return now. I kept saying to myself over and over again: "Surely nothing can stop me now; surely I won't be deprived of what I have earned". I thought of every worst possibility: the south-westerly coast which lay ahead of me was one of the most respected in the world; the crossings were long and landing places few.

Feelings of resentment

“Aren’t you a bit far out on that thing”, the lady asked? She was speaking from the deck of a large cruiser, bearing the initials of the Royal Cork Yacht Club on its transom. We were approaching the tip of the Old Head of Kinsale on a beautiful sunny morning with a light breeze. I replied by increasing my paddle-rate a little and overtook them, but I immediately heard the sound of an engine and was left in their wake. I had left Oysterhaven an hour previously, having spent a delightful rest-day, and was now on the last leg of my journey.

Even though I was passing the sun-drenched Cork coast and was on a calm sea, I became very fed-up towards evening. I resented everyone. I resented Ann whom I knew would be enjoying a folk concert in Páirc Úi Chaoimh. I resented having given a finishing date to my brother-in-law who was arranging my homecoming as I felt under pressure to make the rendezvous for his sake, and I resented all other sea canoeists who apparently enjoyed their sport!

Exhausting day

A pleasant starry night under a cliff at Galley Head improved my mood, but the following day's pull to Cape Clear was even worse. Instead of the usual three- or four-page entry in my log, that day's account was brief and to the point: "Nothing special about today. Just another long exhausting day with head-winds". The prospect of rounding the south-west corner of Ireland in these conditions was adding to my gloom: I was faced with long crossings, few landing places and notorious seas.

“This must be what it’s like in mid ocean”, I said to myself as I headed west from Cape Clear towards Mizen Head and looked around to see grey sea meet grey mist on all sides. I was very uncomfortable with the situation: the compass-bearing on which I was travelling had been made out the previous night in the Youth Hostel on Cape Clear Island but, because of a power failure there, I had hastily done my calculations with one hand while holding lit matches with the other. After all, I’d only had occasion to use the compass a couple of times so far and I had no forewarning of fog.

Shrouded in fog

The fog came down fully before I reached Mizen Head and the Fastnet disappeared like a fading apparition. I chuckled to myself, thinking of a trip out there the previous Easter with a friend and an excited lighthouse keeper being very worried about the appearance of two tiny vessels under his perch. Mizen Head brought no elation - just what might be another serious decision. There was no possibility of taking bearings or writing them on the chart while at sea – any bearings I was likely to need had to be marked the previous night. The bearing I was looking at on the chart would, I hoped, bring me to Black Ball Harbour, about three miles east of Lamb’s Head and Dursey Sound, the point at which I would turn north towards home again.

Apart from the doubt about the compass course, an accuracy of ten degrees was the best I could expect with the boat bucking in such a choppy sea and ten degrees, combined with drift and leeway caused by wind and tide, could leave you well off course after 15 miles. I couldn't look at the compass for more than half-a-dozen strokes at a time because of feelings of nausea in the choppy sea. If anything went wrong, flares couldn't be seen. Away to the west, a sailing vessel came and went out of the mist.

Ghostly appearance

Black Ball Head did eventually appear dead ahead and it had a dull, gray appearance, gradually turning more black as I came closer, and eventually a fisherman guided me to a safe landing place. The evening continued dull and misty and as I camped on long, wet grass and everything got thoroughly damp. My sleeping bag couldn't be put into the watertight compartments and was therefore stored behind the seat, where drops of salt water occasionally trickling through the plastic bags in which it was stowed. These dried out easily but the residue of salt remained and there was so much of it in the bag at this stage that it picked up moisture from the air and the bag seemed damp in any kind of muggy weather.

I was awake at 4 AM next morning to get through Dursey Sound with the start of the tide, and I headed west for the sound in the cold and windy dawn light.

Paddling for 11 hours

The passage through Dursey Sound and under the cable car was spectacular, but then I was hit by a northern wind and swell, and a major dilemma. I was aiming for St. Finan’s Bay in Kerry: I would have to get this far to make the homecoming in Brandon on the day I had indicated. But the wind was strong and straight on the bow. Would I chance it or retreat?

It turned out to be a day that I wouldn’t have thought possible: out of a damp sleeping bag at 4 AM and then 11 hours of continuous paddling, most of it into a direct headwind with choppy,

drenching Atlantic seas. That's how it was and I must have been crazy or a fool to attempt it, but I got away with it.[26]

Typical Kerrymen

I arrived at the mouth of St. Finan's Bay and a salmon boat came over to investigate. If I had been lost I would have known from the way that the fishermen folded their arms, stretched out on the boat and sized me up, that I was looking at Kerrymen! My problems weren't over however, as the seas were still rough and the men in the boat told me that I couldn't land through the surf on the beach and that the pier was impossible unless I knew the place. They advised me to go to Ballinskelligs, but what was a short journey for them with their engines would have been killing for me after an 11-hour, exhausting day.

By this time, I had sometimes tended to ignore the advice of fishermen about landing-places anyway. While they recognised the limitations of my craft, they did not see its advantages and, on more than one occasion had warned me that something could not be done, when it turned out to be nothing out of the ordinary.

The surf posed no problem and I was greeted by a couple of dozen people who had read in the Cork Examiner newspaper about my expected arrival. I struggled out of the boat and started to drag it ashore. One elderly lady took off her shoes and came into the water in her stockings to help me, while everyone else looked on. Then, a photographer from the Kerryman newspaper invited them to join in a photograph. They all trooped out and around me - shoes, stockings, trousers and skirts all getting wet! For a moment I forgot how cold and tired I was and felt amused at being surrounded by supposedly sane human beings, smiling at a photographer, while the waves lapped around their feet.

Rock strewn Sound

I was in Kerry again and had a great, nine-hour sleep that night. A shortcut through a rock-strewn gap caught my eye as I was leaving the bay next morning. The in-coming waves were breaking there but I had no intention of going the long way around if I could avoid it. I tried to judge the best place to go through and sprinted when the time was right. A surge took me to within feet of rocks on my left; a wave was steepening dangerously in front of me; I pulled with all my might and got through just before the wave began crashing behind me in a roar of boiling foam. The adrenaline was pounding through my system, my heart was rattling in my chest, but the incident was forgotten in minutes as I had to make a decision whether to head for Valentia Island or continue on and cross Dingle Bay to Slea Head.

Adventures and thrills

The gods had smiled on me again as the winds had moved to the west as I decided to head for Slea Head - my last, long, worrying hop[27]. The swell was huge at first, despite the moderate wind, but not worrying with very long wave intervals. A yacht was passing south, about a mile away, her hull coming into view only a few times and the top of her mast disappeared for long

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My diary account of the day includes: " … today just doesn't bare talking about. The seas were the biggest I've been in over a long distance – the winds some of the strongest, and the whole thing very off-shore". That leg was approximately 23 miles, meaning that I averaged around 2 miles per hour. With hindsight, one of the more remarkable features was, again, the lack of food and drink: I may have had something like a Mars bar in my cap but I had no means of carrying food on deck or on myself, and had gotten out of the habit of eating at sea. My body must have been very well 'fat adapted' – i.e. able to burn fat for fuel efficiently.

[27] This 'hop' was across Dingle Bay.

intervals. I enjoyed the crossing: the day was fine and I thought back on all the adventures and thrills I had found on the hills and seas that surrounded me.

The Great Blasket
I had landed on the tiny beach at Curmeenole just under Slea Head. I was luck in that it often has heavy surf and I hoped that the wind wouldn't turn and throw up that big dumping surf which often prevails there and which could easily prevent me from going out again next morning.

Over the years I had grown accustomed to Kerry, but as I cooked my meal that evening at Curmeenole I could not but be moved by the view across the Blasket Sound. The sea was a brilliant blue, a few stray clouds hung in the sky and across the narrow stretch of water that now looked so peaceful and harmless, the Great Blasket was clear green, while the other islands became gradually duller with distance from the mainland. Once I had read of a funeral of 16 boats leaving the little pier on the Great Blasket for Dunquin and I thought what a lovely sight it would be to see 16 curraghs in line astern stretched out across the Sound.

Dramatic changes
The end of my journey was only one good day's paddle away but as I wasn't expected until the following day and I was going to make two relatively short journeys, the first of which was to Brandon Creek. It was a pleasant morning as I rushed up the Blasket Sound with a strong tide, but things changed dramatically when the tide ran into the north-westerly wind and swell at the northern end of the sound. It was the first time I had to make extensive use of support strokes and the boat moved involuntarily under me because I had lost so much weight that my hips didn't fit the seat tightly enough to give me full control. Locals would have called the sea 'lumpy'. The whole thing was like being on a switch-back railway. It was a scene of interchanging gaping holes of water and conical peaks, capped with snow-like breaking foam. You fall into a hole which suddenly becomes a peak and your stomach gets that jolt which occurs when you jump from a high diving board.[28]

Ten miles to go
From a distance, the entrance to Brandon Creek appeared to be plastered with breaking waves and I was worried that I wouldn't get through, but it wasn't as bad as it appeared. The often-used imagery of the sailor finding peace in the shelter of a port after a journey through rough seas was never more true as I paddled up the fjord-like creek that evening. I was only about 10 miles from the end of my journey but didn't allow myself the luxury of self-congratulations: I couldn't. Over the past week the sea had provided me with the sort of conditions that could have finished me seven weeks earlier when I was without the benefit of greater experience and fitness. The following day's forecast predicted similar conditions. I was worried that a slight shift in the wind would make it impossible to leave in the morning.

Moved by elation
I spent that last night in pleasant company - old fishermen in a quiet corner of an un-modernised pub - and they went over every foot of the remaining few miles with me. I was glad of that day being one of the roughest and the problem of staying upright precluded any emotion.[29] I only allowed myself to be moved by elation when I saw the old WW II look-out tower at the top of

[28] I later came to learn of this sea state as 'clapotis', caused by waves reflecting back off cliffs and colliding with incoming waves, producing a very confused sea.

Brandon Point and knew that my crazy, impossible, fool's dream had come true. I soon rounded Brandon Point and was in calm water. Twenty minutes later, I brought the boat ashore for the last time. I had travelled almost I,000 miles in a tiny craft, along some of the most dangerous coastline in the world. I did it alone and with the strength of my own hands. Yet, in comparison with other major achievements, it was a puny effort and will be of no significance in the history of man's adventure or exploration.

Achieved my ambition
I hope that it was significant however, in inspiring some of those people who like myself lived ordinary lives and had dreams of doing something adventurous. I achieved my ambition without having to spend an exorbitant amount of money or going to the ends of the Earth to carry it out. I had no big publicity machine and none of the high-powered promotion and financing involved in many modern expeditions. Perhaps I have shown that in this world, where the glorification of the famous by the media makes the normal person feel irrelevant, the ordinary person can still do his own thing.

There was a large welcome party of family, neighbours from home and friends. After having had a few drinks I put the boat on the roof-rack and sat into the car with Ann to go home. But first we drove up to the top of Brandon Point and there I had one last look at the huge expanse of blue sea, dotted with breaking white-horses. There, I gave thanks for having being allowed to pass safely. I did not feel arrogant nor did I think that I had conquered the sea. Rather, the sea had made me humble and now I realised more than ever, that man, despite the sense of his own importance and achievement, is completely at the mercy of the whims of Nature.

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With Ann and my uncle in Brandon on the day of departure.

Arriving into Brandon; I had two curraghs in escort, one with Ger Kavanagh rowing

Landing in Brandon

Some of the reception party in Brandon (with my sister, Ursula) – note the hole worn in my tracksuit trousers from bracing the boat with my knees