

**Title: Canoe Crossings**

**Subtitle:** Understanding the Craft That Helped Shape British Columbia

**Author:** Sanford Osler

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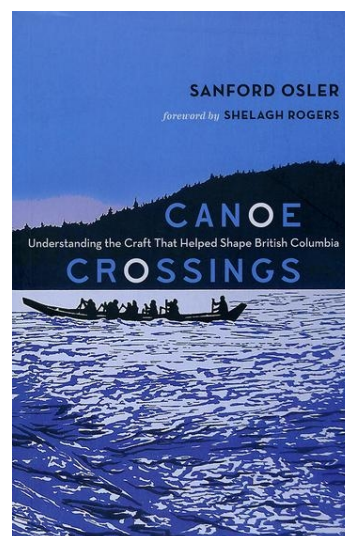
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**Review:** Paul Caffyn



In 2007 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation held a contest to determine the 'Seven Wonders of Canada'. Among 20,000 nominees was the canoe. Although one of judges felt the canoe united people across the country and, despite its ancient roots, it was still a part of everyday lives - in nationwide polls it scored poorly. Author Sanford Osler, who had been paddling since he was a kid, was disappointed with the national results and suspected it was due to a lack of understanding of the significance of the canoe.

When asked to give a talk to his local church, he chose the canoe as a subject but after initially focussing on different types of canoes, he saw broader themes cutting across the canoe categories. His slide show with his 16 foot canoe at centre stage was so good, he was encouraged to take it to a wider audience and paddlers attending his talks were only too happy to share their stories, which ultimately led to this book.

At first glance, the photos in two colour plate segments suggest a strong bias towards racing, dragon boats, waka amas, Canadian canoes and really long Salish racing canoes (50+ foot long). A chapter titled 'Racing Canoes' I thought would not interest me in the slightest. Although I was introduced to paddling a K1 kayak as a school kid, and indeed still own a K1, once I started sea kayaking I felt there was no place for competitiveness - there was sufficient risk and danger when paddling exposed coasts let alone add to the risk by competing against other paddlers to get to some other place first.

Aside from my anti-racing bias, I do have a soft spot for Canadian canoes. The very first boat I owned as a school kid was a 17 foot Peterborough style canoe. With so many books already in my library on the design, construction and paddling of canoes in Canada, what could a slim paperback size book add?

I started reading the first chapter late one evening thinking, 'This will put me off to sleep', but not far in I was hooked. The seven chapter headings seem rather broad, for instance the first four are:

- The Birchbark Canoe
- The Dugout Canoe
- The Skin Canoe
- The First Canoes....

Entire books have been written about each of those heading subjects but Sanford Osler has carried out a remarkable amount of research, both via literary searches and interviews with paddlers young and old. In 'The Skin Canoe' chapter, Osler writes about the significance of the historical Aleut baidarka bifid bow and introduces George Dyson who, who lived in a tree house while building his 48 foot long baidarka *Mt Fairweather*. He then introduces Doug Simpson who founded a company to build his *Feathercraft* folding kayaks. So many familiar names from the 70s and 80s, all associated with the rapid growth in sea kayaking.

Even the chapter on 'Racing Canoes' had me engrossed. The coastal First Nations racing canoe meets had almost died out by 1900, but a resurgence in recent years was led by community leaders who saw the canoe's potential to bring people together in exciting news ways, for instance, a group of high school students who practised on a tiny lake and went on to win several World Dragon Boat Championships; and a heart-warming stories of at-risk Aboriginal youth who reconnected with their traditional culture through annual 'big canoe' trips.

A bibliography, end-notes and index round out a marvellous wee treasure of a book on the significance, both historical and modern, of how paddlecraft helped shape the history of British Columbia.