

DUGOUT CANOE BOOK REVIEWS

Title: *Modern-Day Castaway*

Subtitle: *A real-life adventure*

Author: Michael Atkinson

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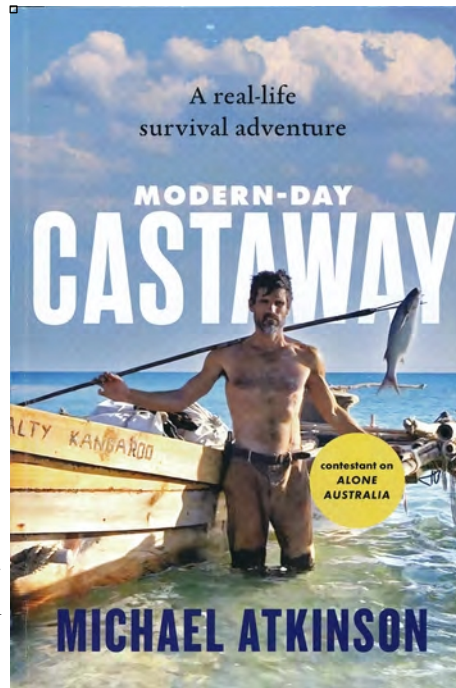
Contents: 244 pp, 1 map, b&w pics in text, central 20 pp colour section

Cover: soft cover

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Review: Paul Caffyn



Off the Queensland coast in 1846, a merchant sailing ship was wrecked on a coral reef. A raft with 23 survivors drifted westwards over the Great Barrier Reef to the coast, where eventually only one man survived, who was integrated into the local Aboriginal tribe. His survival story was the inspiration for author Michael Atkinson to build a dug-out canoe, and sail north up the Queensland coast to Cape York, using the basic materials that the shipwreck survivors used on their raft drift to shore.

After finishing school, Michael started uni(versity) but dropped out to join the Australian army as a helicopter pilot. Between overseas deployments and training, he was based in Darwin and made a point of doing every military survival course he could sign up for. Solo voyages in a tinnie (aluminium dinghy) around Melville and Bathurst islands led to a trip with his girlfriend, in the tinnie, from Darwin around much of the Kimberleys. After qualifying as a fighter pilot, but bottom of the class, Michael left his flying career and decided to make a film about the two German aviators who in 1932 landed a floatplane off Cape Bernier, in the Kimberleys, and their eventual rescue by a local Aboriginal tribe. The film did really well in Australia and overseas, which led to his planning to make a second film about a dugout canoe voyage.

Starting out with a four-tonne log, Michael initially used hand tools to shape a dugout canoe, then sped up the process with power tools. Two outrigger floats (amas) provided stability and he carved a rudder out of a single piece of wood. Film making equipment required solar panels and battery banks, with a drone for aerial shots. Material for a canvas sail was acquired from the Sydney Heritage Fleet. His self-rescue plan was an inflatable paddle board, along with a waterproof survival bag. Michael did include a PLB and EPIRB with satellite tracking ability. As back-up, he had a battery operated drop-down propeller.

Although an initial sea trial required rescue by the NSW Water Police, it was a good learning experience for his future sailing skills. So that's the background to the voyage.

Michael launched from Cape Cleveland, near Townsville, close to where that survivor of the 1846 voyage came ashore. A very readable yarn, with good historical snippets and how Michael endeavoured to live off the land with fishing and gathering on-shore bush tucker. Almost 50 days and 500 kms later, he completed the voyage on Thursday Island.

Michael made a point of ensuring he had prior permission from the local traditional land owners and, on the sailing voyage, he made every effort to catch up with the locals and compare how his bush tucker gathering skills matched that of the locals.

Rather concerned with crocodiles, when he slept overnight on the dugout, he descended into a Cubicle, armed with a big knife that he could slide up through a gap around the hatch cover to deter any 'on-deck' croc! The snippets about croc attacks are vague with no dates, although Dave (Crocodile Winky) who rescued his paddling mate from a croc attack is briefly noted, Dave neither gets his surname mentioned, nor the fact that he was awarded the highest bravery medal in Australia from the GG for his courageous rescue.

The single page map of Queensland shows his sailing route and the 1846 raft drift. The text is well illustrated with relevant black and white pictures, while a central 20-page colour section adds life to the illustrations, but each photo page has almost as much blank white paper as text. Why publishers can't bleed photos out to the page margin continues to baffle me.

In his author notes, Michael writes that he deliberately avoided naming or sharing of exact locations that he visited, because: 'He didn't want to increase the amount of traffic they get'. Having paddled this section of the Queensland coast in 25 days back in 1982, it took a bit of head scratching at times to figure out where he landed or which bay he crossed. And who else but expedition kayakers are able to cruise so close to this beautiful coastline?

His doco of the dugout canoe voyage is still in the offing and I reckon there will be impressive footage of catching his drone from the dugout stern on a bouncy sea. A very readable adventure story with excellent hints on surviving on the Coral Coast without (most of) the trappings of modern-day society. As well as the print paperback, there is an 'ebook' and an 'audio' book.