

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Eastern Arctic Kayaks: History, Design, Technique*

Subtitle: *History, Design, Technique*

Authors: John D. Heath & Eugene Arima

Contributions from: John Brand, Hugh Collings, Harvey Golden, H.C. Petersen, Johannes Rosing & Greg Stamer

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Review: Christopher Cunningham

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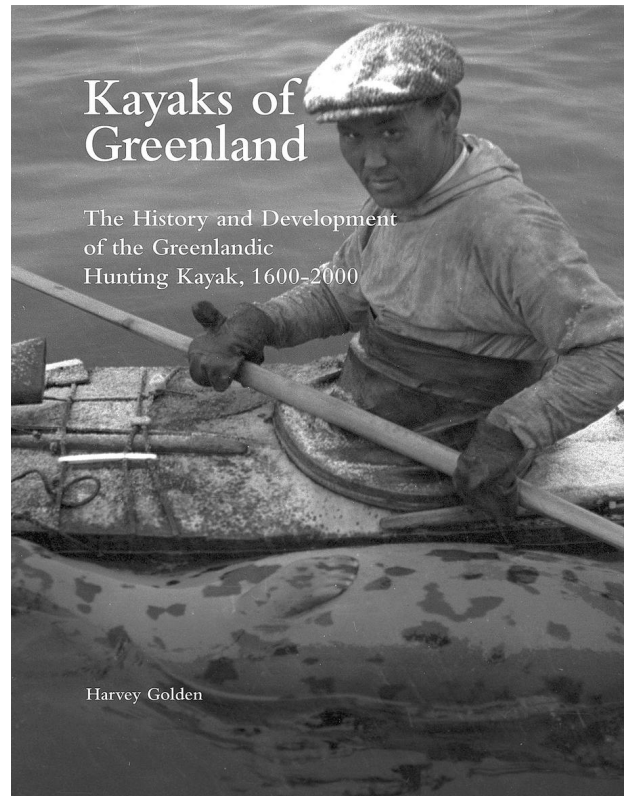
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There are some books that are destined to become classics the moment they're released. I suspect *Eastern Arctic Kayaks* will take its place alongside greats such as *Skinboats of Greenland* and *Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America*. The list of contributors to this new volume includes the late John Heath, a frequent *Sea Kayaker* contributor, and Canadian ethnologist Eugene Arima, also the author of several articles for *Sea Kayaker*.

This book represents a passing of the torch to some younger emerging students of traditional kayaking: Greg Stamer and Harvey Golden. The book begins with a memorial to John Heath. Heath lived long enough to get this work to the publisher but unfortunately died before it went to press.

Heath's opening chapter, '*Kayaks for Greenland*', is, like Heath was, brimming with a broad spectrum of information about traditional kayaks. His description of several museum specimens is accompanied by line drawings and photographs. His section on Greenland paddles is brief—only a page and a half—and without illustrations (Collings and Brand include drawings in later chapters), but it has valuable information on stroke dynamics and scaling a paddle to fit, as well as a description of a 'parlour trick' for 'bouncing' a paddle off the water and using it half-submerged as a megaphone to call seals.

Heath goes into greater detail on training, paddling and rolling techniques. His line drawings illustrate a number of rolls and braces and include two drawings first published in Heath's appendix to Adney and Chappelle's classic volume, *Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America* (Smithsonian Institution, 1964). For anyone interested in learning a few of the many different Greenland rolls, this section is reason enough to get this book.



Heath's instructions are clearly written and will be sufficient for many to learn Greenland techniques, and for others, it will serve as a valuable companion to Heath's videos. There is also a section that instructors will find helpful in helping new paddlers get used to the capsized position, whether following the Greenland model of teaching rolling or the recreational approach of teaching wet exiting. Some of the advanced rolling techniques—using the paddle, floats, throwing sticks and hands alone—include sequential photographs.

Surprisingly, at the end of the rolling section, Heath writes: “But most Greenlanders cannot roll at all. One of the veteran seal catchers...could not do any of the capsizing manoeuvres that the youngsters were performing. But he had once caught 20 seals in one day, which won him more respect...than he would have gotten as a champion kayaker.”

The chapter “*Using Greenland Paddles; an Overview*” is the contribution by Greg Stamer of Florida. He was the winner of his age class in the 2000 Greenland championships and winner of his age class in the rolling division in 2002. He overlaps some of Heath's material on Greenland paddles, albeit with a bit more detail, but goes into great depth on the forward stroke. Stamer appears in his chapter's photographs dressed in a neoprene replica of the Greenland tuiq, using a modern laminated Greenland-style paddle and paddling a modern composite kayak. While he seems a bit out of place in a book dominated by lashed wood and sealskin, Stamer helps the book and the growing Greenland movement bridge the gap between the traditional and modern recreational kayakers.

Harvey Golden also competed in the Greenland championships, but his efforts have been focused on documenting museum specimens and building replicas to see how they handle. More than anyone, Golden has taken on Heath's mantle and is, fortunately, remarkably well qualified for that role. His chapter describes 11 of an astounding 38 kayaks that he documented on a trip to Europe and Greenland. His drawings, with one exception, depict the skin-covered forms, so the viewer must speculate on the hidden intricacies of the framework, just as Golden did when building his replicas.

Collings presents two kayaks in a Swedish collection. His drawings illustrate elements of kayak construction and deck fittings and paddle cross-sections and joinery.

John Brand, in the following chapter, elevates kayak documentation to an art form that appears to combine elements of construction blueprints and patent drawings. Brand's material in *Eastern Arctic Kayaks* is excerpted from his long-out-of-print trilogy, *The Little Kayak Book*. Brand's descriptions of 11 kayaks appear without the copious notes that appeared in his original trilogy. Readers of *Eastern Arctic Kayaks* will see Brand's drawings labelled with letters without the notes they refer to. The drawings also appear without the tables of offsets he had originally included. For the home builder, this is an unfortunate omission, but his drawings and abridged descriptions are nonetheless valuable to readers interested in the variations on the traditional kayak theme.

The brief contributions from H.C. Petersen and Johannes Rosing are excerpted from *Kajjakk*, a small volume published in 1991, and only in Danish. Petersen describes a number of training games played by young kayakers. He also cites some impressive numbers in describing fast passages made by Greenland paddlers. One paddler covered 85 miles at an average speed of 7.1 miles per hour, and another, Ezekias Davidson, covered about 17 miles in under an hour. Petersen suggests that a variant of the forward stroke made such speed possible: “The paddle is dipped deep into the water and the stroke is performed fast with an upward motion so the current hits the aft end of the kayak from below and lifts it upward.” Heath mentioned this stroke on occasion. I've tried it without success, but I haven't followed up on Davidson's training tip: “I run out of tobacco and have to get to the store fast.”

Arima, in his chapter 'Kayaks of the East Canadian Arctic,' also mentions the use of a special forward stroke used by the Canadian Inuit to chase down fast-swimming caribou: 'When the paddle is tilted, the kayak will not have a tendency to dig in but will run on top.' Arima describes a number of arcane kayaking techniques that make it clear that native kayakers were working with a degree of refinement that seems quite distant from recreational practices. I have paddled over seven knots only on a handful of occasions, and to paddle at that speed, pick up a harpoon to hit a seal or a whale in a vital organ or at a particular moment of its surfacing, all seems unimaginably difficult. But who knows - if your life hangs in the balance or you're dying for a smoke, maybe such things are possible.

That almost mystical speed and sea-keeping ability of early kayaks is perhaps the allure of traditional kayaking and the appeal of a book like *Eastern Arctic Kayaks*. This book is not merely about ancient kayaks gathering dust in museums. To be sure, it peers into those fragile dark hulls, but it also traces the thread of kayaking culture through roughly four centuries of documented history to the renewal of traditional kayaking in the present day. The legacy has much to offer devotees of skin-on-frame kayaks as well as the rest of the modern kayaking community. We can, through the eyes of Heath, Arima and the others, in the words of John Brand, "see the kayaks in our museums as live things dancing over the waves as they did when their makers were young."

Christopher Cunningham was editor of *Sea Kayaker*.

SOME NOTES ON THE AUTHORS & CONTRIBUTORS.

by Paul Caffyn

John Heath died in July 2003, unfortunately before he could see the results of his lifelong passion in the history of skin kayaks in print. Born in 1923, John began writing regular articles on skin kayaks and paddlers of the Arctic regions for *American White Water* magazine in the early 1960's. His 1968 article 'Eskimo Kayakers of King Island' is of interest for Canterbury paddlers as a King Island kayak is held at the museum in Christchurch. An appendix on the '*Kayak Roll*' by John Heath was included in the classic *The Bark and Skin Boats of North America* by Adney and Chapelle.

John wrote a total of 17 articles in *Sea Kayaker* magazine including profiles of the best Greenland paddlers. His trips to Greenland to study the locals styles of rolling and paddling led to John bringing the reigning Greenland kayak champion to the USA and they toured the country demonstrating traditional rolls and rope exercises.

Although John Brand acknowledged in first *Little Kayak Book* that John Heath was the father of modern kayak research, John Brand, an architect, was the leading light in Great Britain with carrying out surveys of 21 skin kayaks stored in English and Danish museums. His three self-published books *The Little Kayak Book, Part II and Part III* are works of art with detailed drawings and handwritten text. *Part II* includes '*An Introduction for Kayak Surveying*', which was used when Canterbury paddlers surveyed the King Island kayak in 1997.

Eugene Arima, a Canadian ethnohistorian, has several significant books published on skins kayaks of the Arctic:

- *A Contextual Study of the Caribou Eskimo Kayak* 1975,

- *Inuit Kayaks of Canada: A Review of Historical Records and Construction* 1987

and was editor of the 1991 *Contributions to Kayak Studies*, which included papers by 11 writers, such as John Heath, Gert Nooter, George Dyson and Kenneth Taylor.

H.C. Petersen was born in Greenland in 1929. Concerned in the 1950s by the disappearance of skin kayaks from the villages, being replaced by wooden dinghies, Petersen was determined not to see the traditional techniques of hunting and kayak building lost forever. His research led in 1986 to the publishing of his book *Skinboats of Greenland*. This 215 page beautifully illustrated hardback is the classic work on Greenland kayaks and hunting techniques. His second smaller book on *Instruction in Kayak Building* was published in 1981, with text in Greenlandic, Danish and English.