

Title: *Paddling to Jerusalem*

Subtitle: *An Aquatic Tour of Our Small Country*

Author: David Aaronovitch

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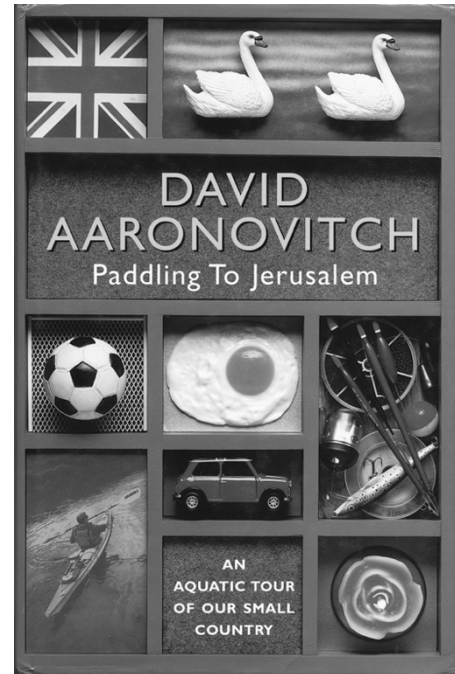
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Review: Alan Byde



A story of a family man in his 40s, journalist, 258 pounds +/-, mid life crisis. Bored with his job and overweight he intended to do something adventurous, so he bought a sea going kayak and set off going north from London on the canal system. He took a course in kayaking which seemed less than adequate. Those who paddle the rivers and the sea rarely venture on canals. David reveals the drawbacks. After three days of rain he quits. He goes home but his wife returns him to the misery of views limited by canal banks, towpaths, dead dogs floating, vicious killer dogs defending grim warehouses, male swans defending their territory with fury.

Does this put you off the idea of reading the book? He captured my interest by the sardonic humour he employs. Several involuntary guffaws caused my wife to ask, "What's so funny?" To have known English events about 50 to 20 years ago extracts the full flavour. As the days and miles went by he came to locks on the canal where a difference in levels allows narrow boats to rise or fall from one level to another. Kayaks are not allowed to go through alongside narrow boats for fear they are sunk by the inrush of water – the kayaks that is. He relates how he exited the cockpit, put the loaded kayak on its wheels and dragged it up the lock system, which can be anything from one to three and five more locks in a chain. Very wearying. Soon he found that narrow-boat skippers were happy to strap his kayak on the roof of the narrow boat and carry him upwards and onwards.

His views on Northern English ways are peppered with comments on the beauty of the land which being hilly could be seen from the cockpit. Camping on the grass adjacent to a pub had its drawbacks too. Fishermen with their rods, lines and hooks gave him problems. On the Severn at Ironbridge he descends Jackfield rapids where 1966-67 I took school children paddling. We changed in the bottle store of a pub there. Now the pub is derelict. He comments on the people where he enjoyed B&B - he is a powerful observer of human nature.

I found many critical observations. He mentions narrow-boats surging at speed, crewed by feckless youths, dropping water in the cockpit so it seems he did not use a spraydeck. Towards the end of his long journey he describes tenosynovitis, right wrist, (Feathered paddle, right hand control) which for a man engaged in writing is a serious drawback. In my view feathered paddles for novices on canals are unsuitable. If English history going back to Oliver Cromwell interests you, the next bit as he follows the Thames is riveting. Well, it riveted me. He mentions Osney Lock at Oxford where the spill weir could have killed me when the Thames was in flood - long story. To read these names took me there, his descriptions are powerful.

When tenosynovitis threatened, he called his wife and she took away the kayak, tent, accumulated gear and left him his walking boots. At Oxford he spends a night at the Randolph hotel, a pricey place for the well heeled. He continued his journey along the Thames towpath visiting places of interest along the way. He arrives at Greenwich and the site of the 'Dome of Discovery' still under construction. That dates his journey. Then he takes the Underground and goes home. The final part of the book is about his family, the emotion he expresses gave me reason to examine my own. This book is not much about kayaking, it is a solid warning about paddling on canals in cities, great on history of England, overall a gripping read.

'Paddling to Jerusalem' is (one assumes) a reference to Blake's hymn 'Jerusalem'.

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

*And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark satanic mills?*