

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Paddle to the Arctic*

Author: Don Starkell

Published: 1995

Publisher: McClelland & Stewart Inc, Canada,

ISBN: 0-7710-8239-8

Subject: Kayak/sled trip through the Northwest Passage; Hudson Bay to Gjoa Haven with Victoria Jason, Gjoa Haven to near Tuktoyaktuk solo.

Cover: Hardback

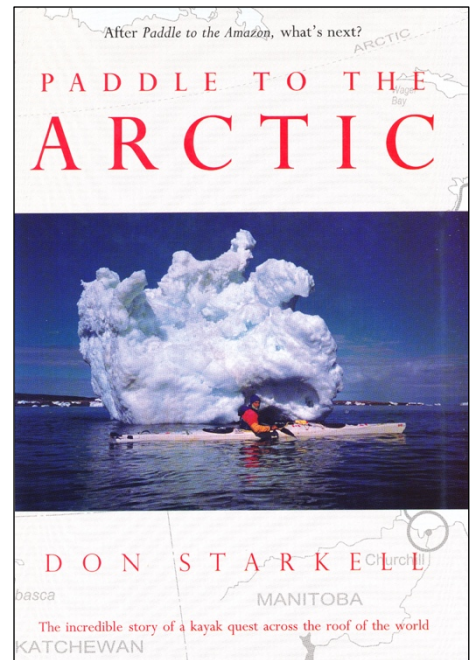
Contents: 313 pages, 5 maps, 49 b&w pics in three sections

Size: 160 x 235mm

Price: US\$24.95

Reviewed by: Paul Caffyn

This has not been an easy book to review, particularly as this is the second account of a trip that was written about so well by Victoria Jason in her book *Kabloona in the Yellow Kayak*.



Don Starkell's first major canoeing expedition was from Winnipeg in Canada to the mouth of the Amazon River, described in *Paddle to the Amazon*. This book is an engrossing adventure story, with all the highs and lows with his two sons, punch ups on the beaches, and sound descriptive writing of the sights and scenes. The initial draft of 1,400 pages of densely typed typing was edited by Charles Wilkins into a very readable book.

'Paddle to the Arctic' is Don's story of his three attempts in 1990, 1991 and 1992, to navigate Canada's Northwest Passage. In 1990, Don set out solo from Churchill, in Hudson Bay, aiming for Tuktoyaktuk at the mouth of the Mackenzie River delta. His boat was an 18' long *Seal* kayak, 21" beam, 70 pound fibreglass. On his fourth day out, still close to Churchill, he capsized in shallows and was unable to initially right the kayak. Then there was too much water in the cockpit to climb back in without capsizing again. He then attempted to swim/push the kayak towards shore, but then he blacks out in the sea for 30 minutes! - no lifejacket, no wetsuit, no drysuit - and 'when the lights come on again', he is halfway to shore. Finally on shore, he decides to warm up in his down sleeping bag, but finds it half-soaked, but climbs in fully clothed and wet, and blacks out again. Some 14 days after setting out, Don returns to Churchill.

In 1991, he returns to Churchill with Fred Reffler and Victoria Jason. Fred pulls out early but Victoria continues with him to Repulse Bay, despite heated arguments almost daily. Victoria keeps telling Don they are paddling in the wrong direction along Southampton Island. Don ignores this until they meet Inuit hunters in a dinghy out seal hunting who confirm Vicki's navigation. An incredible navigation blunder which added many miles extra to the paddle.

In 1992, Don and Victoria travelled overland from Repulse Bay to Spence Bay on Inuit sleds towed behind skidoos. From there they hauled their kayaks on small sleds across the ice south to Gjoa Haven, where Vicki was forced to pull out with oedema. Don continues man hauling to Cambridge Bay with a tent that had no fly - wet sleeping bag and wet clothes!

Although this is his third year, Don still persists in wearing inadequate paddling clothes - launching in surf, he is drenched every time. At Wilmot Island, a rock falls on his foot and damages four toes. This leads to what for me is the low point of the book. Don calls at the Cape Young Dewline station and demands medical attention for his infected toes (infected as he was not taking antibiotics that he had with him), a shower, use of a telephone and a bed for the night. When he is turned down - no prior notice to any of the Dewline stations - he is ready to belt the station manager. Paddling away in a rage, he continues to write about his reception there in scathing terms. Despite winter fast approaching, he continues towards Tuktoyaktuk but ends up on September 18 on an offshore sandbar, where he ends up in a collapsed tent under snow. His paddling clothes for this last stage were, 'light paddling clothes, covered by my borrowed orange drilling-site overalls, and on top of everything, the yellow oilcloth jacket and pant drilling outfit'.

On 24 September the pilot of a rescue plane from Inuvik sights Don under the snow and he is rescued by helicopter. Even when the rescue team tell him his hands are badly frozen, he maintains they are only cold and stiff! He informs the rescue team that he was still planning on walking the remaining 50 miles to Tuktoyaktuk. His inadequate foot and hand protection led to amputation of the tops of a number of fingers and toes.

In the introduction to the book, Don notes, 'The account is taken from my daily journals, with additional information from my travelling partners, my research, and a vivid memory.'

My first niggle with the book is the abbreviated diary style: '6.40pm. Good sleep - calm, windfree night. Up at 6.00am and away at 7.00am. Fantastic conditions. Very tired from previous long days of passionate paddling (46, 32, 30, 48, and today 31 miles) - 187 miles in the last five days - average 37.5 miles per day (not washed up yet)'. This style of clipped writing is tedious to read. The sections which were not recorded in his diary, but rely on 'a vivid memory' are full descriptive prose and easier to read.

The second niggle is that the book lacks fill-in or contrasting information on the Inuit, the flora and fauna, and historical snippets on the quest for the Northwest Passage.

For myself, the book is almost a torture to read, as it chronicles examples of bad judgemental decision making. At least Don is honest in detailing the navigation errors but I wonder why on earth, particularly in 1991 and 1992, he did not include 100% waterproof bags, a *Goretex* drysuit, synthetic clothes suitable for paddling in the Arctic, and a sturdy tent with a fly. His determination to succeed is unquestionable but at what cost - the loss of fingers and toes.

As for the drama at the Cape Young, his scathing writing about the reception there, reflects poorly on all Arctic adventurers. Self-sufficiency is the name of the game - it is tantamount to comfy survival in the Arctic. Thorough research and meticulous planning are required, combined with training and trialling of gear and equipment. My philosophy has always been to be self-contained and not have any expectations when meeting people at villages or Dewline stations. If there is the offer of a feed, a shower, and convivial conversation, well and good. If not, provided there are no expectations, then there is not a problem.

The black and white photographs are adequate but burdened with large white borders which tend to mask their impact. A full map of the route covered is printed on the endpapers and each chapter has a small vignette map showing the route followed.

For the inveterate sea kayaking bookaphile, this is a must for the library as there are so few precious narratives published on Arctic paddling. A consummate adventurer Don Starkell, but not a good role model for expedition sea kayakers.

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