

Title: *The Sea-Paddler's Tale*

Author: Geoff Hunter & Bill Taylor

Published: 2023

Publisher: Vanguard Press, GB

Contents: 242 pp, a few colour and b&w images

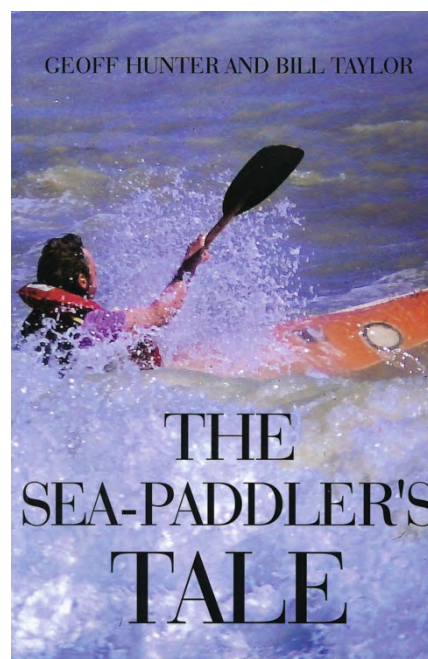
Cover: softcover

Size: 156 x 234 mm

ISBN: 978-1-80016-449-9

Availability: from the publisher £12.99 + p&p

Review: Paul Caffyn



On 3 May 1970, a young English paddler set off from Maidstone in the Thames estuary to paddle in an anti-clockwise direction around Britain. Geoff Hunter was paddling a skinny plywood *Angmagssalik* kayak, which he named *Nimrod 1*. Unlike the skin boats of East Greenland, his kayak had fore and aft bulkheads with two deck accessible storage compartments, in which Geoff carried his Primus, food and camping gear. On 7 November, he paddled back into Maidstone, notching up the first solo paddle around England, Wales and southern bits of Scotland. Geoff took two shortcuts, one through the Caledonian Canal and a second through the Crinan Canal. This was rather fortuitous for Nigel Dennis and I in 1980, when we achieved the first mainland kayak circumnavigation of Britain.

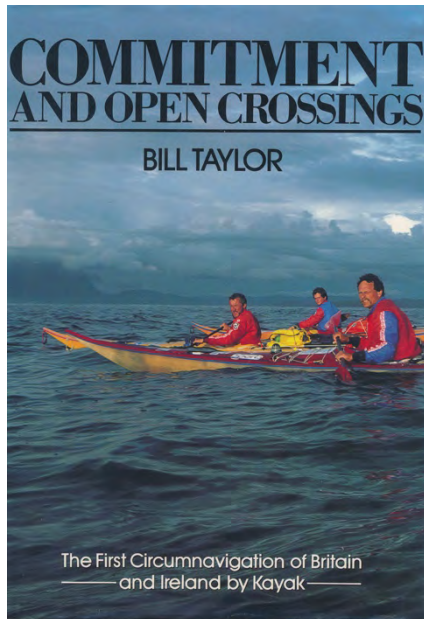
Geoff kept a journal of his 1970 paddle, but was unable to attract a book publisher until another similar kayak owner, Jack Clarke offered to edit his manuscript, and published *Angmagssalik Round Britain* in 1982, a slender 105-page softcover, with hand drawn maps, black and white photos, and some beautiful cartoons by DAG from Scotland.

An outstanding highlight (lowlight for Geoff) was crossing the Solway Firth from Scotland to Workington in England. On 31 July, calm initial conditions deteriorated with a leaking sprayskirt slowly filling his cockpit. Geoff broke his paddle rolling after a capsized, but eventually rolled up with half a paddle. Making little headway towards Workington, he reached a big channel navigation buoy and spent a night precariously perched on top, while his tethered kayak wore through its mooring rope, leaving him stranded. Geoff was hopeful Coastguard would come looking for him, as he had advised of the firth crossing and his landing point.



With only a lifejacket for buoyancy, Geoff set off swimming next morning, and was within half a mile of shore when he was finally picked up by two couples in a dinghy. He had lost not only his kayak, but all his money and paddling kit. Loaned a similar kayak, Geoff resumed paddling, undeterred by his 'shipwreck' and eventually completed his paddle on 7 November.

In 1986, three paddlers went paddles all of Britain and Ireland in - Mick Wibrew, Richard Elliott and Bill Taylor. *Commitment and Open Crossings* was published in 1990 as a hardback by Diadem, the text by Bill Taylor, with superb maps, two colour plate sections and some corker black and white photos, even double pages bled out to the margins. Along with an



index and rear pages with nautical terms, it is one of finest illustrated sea kayak narratives. If you have a hankering to have your own story published, this is the one that sets the benchmark for layout.

In this 2023 title *The Sea-Paddler's Tale*, Bill Taylor wanted to bring Geoff Hunter's 1970 tale back into print. In the 'Foreword' Bill notes that both Geoff and he were not happy with Jack Clarke's edit and interpretation of Geoff's journals, so Bill wrote a new account including excerpts from the original journals. An admirable intention, but even the title lets this book down – there is no sub-title, narry a hint as to Geoff's kayak trip around Britain.

Bill does include a backgrounder chapter on the development of kayaks in Britain, but claims Geoff's *Nimrod I* is a West Greenland kayak, which it is not – quite obvious by the long projecting stem and stern. He

then claimed that in 1932, Gino Watkins 'began a series of expeditions to Greenland'. This disappoints. Gino was leading his fourth Arctic expedition in 1932, when he tragically drowned on 20 August that year, whilst out seal hunting in his skin kayak. From our fibreglass kayaks, Conrad Edwards and I drank a toast to Gino and his heritage of kayaking, close to the glacier face where he went missing, in Tugtulik or Lake Fjord in East Greenland.

The chapter heading maps are really bad, even by kayak club newsletter standards. Illegible place names, no demarcation of land and water, no paddling route shown and no scale. The maps in the 1982 book were roughly hand-drawn, with no scale but Geoff's paddling route was shown and the place names are very readable.

Minor photo improvements with some new colour images up to page 56, not seen in Jack Clarke's 1982 book, but thereafter there is not a single photo through to the last page. None of the near full-page b&w images of Geoff, or the delightful DAG cartoons! One of which is featured on the cover, showing a paddler on a mission with his route around Britain shown. The cover did not need a subtitle - the DAG image provided that.

German paddler Fridel Meyer set off from London in 1933 for a round Britain paddle in a folding kayak with her dog *Wuffles*, with an Australian paddler Jack Nolan deciding to compete against her. Fridel was banged up in a Scotland car crash while on her way to a lecture and Jack disappeared from the scene with apparent kidney problems.

Then in 1970 Geoff Hunter decided to have a go. A gutsy solo paddle, well recorded and illustrated in Jack Clarke's book. Yes, it is good to see Bill Taylor's rejig of Geoff's journal back in print, but it could have been so much better with illustrations, maps and photos of the quality seen in the classic *Commitment and Open Crossings*.

Douglas (DAG) Godlington's cartoon of the Solway Firth buoy and Geoff trying to climb on top, while keeping hold of his kayak and paddle. Opposite p.62 in Jack Clarke's 1982 book.

