

Title: Searching for the Finmen

Subtitle: *An Unplanned Journey in Homage to the Kayak and its Inuit Masters*

Author: Norman Rogers

Published: 2012

Publisher: Matador UK

Contents: 203 pp, 11 colour plates, maps & figures, bibliography, index

Cover: softcover

Size: 156 x 234 mm

Price: £12.99

ISBN: 978 1780880 778

Availability: Out of print

Review: Alan Byde

The writing has a natural flow that invites one to turn the page again and again. A few hours of undivided attention is advised. Way back when my family was new and kayaks were magic a parallel Universe of water opened to me where I found my métier. Recently Paul advised me to buy this book. In it I found several powerful links to my life.

The Prologue begins, "*He lay almost motionless on the beach...*"

Kipling wrote:

"I keep six honest serving-men

(They taught me all I knew);

Their names are What and Why and When

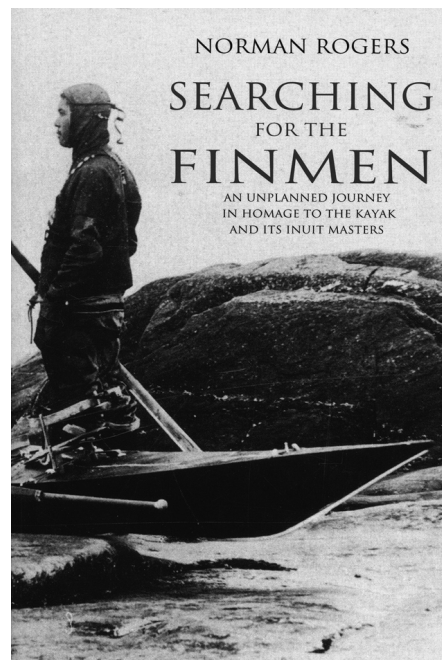
And How and Where and Who."

Right away they were there in my head.

Norman Rogers' enthusiasm for Marathon racing is on the first page where he mentions his training area, a long calm section of the River Tyne at Hexham near to Hadrian's Wall. He paddles a K1 so his sense of balance was keen. On the 22nd of July 1961 there was a big area 'canoeing' event, paddlers came from far away. There was an upsurge in interest in the UK generally. As a member of the North East Canoeing Association I was invited to paddle one of the only two K1s there. They were built by Jicwood who gave six K1s to the British Canoe Union for the 1948 Olympics in London. They were beautifully made of fine wood and being of semi-circular section, tippy, but I managed to complete the course. My interest was captured, back to 51 years ago on a sunny summer's day.

Norman was training for the 2002 Devizes to Westminster K2 event, 124 miles in less than 24 hours, hours of that in the dark. He was in Fenland, a vast level area of soggy ground, drained by pumps. His training was on a 20 mile circuit around the town of March. During the circuit he came to an industrial area surrounded by a chain link fence on three sides but open to the water on the fourth. Guarding the area was a savage dog which did not hesitate to attack his K1. Images of Cerberus come to mind. After the second attack which he narrowly escaped, his heart rate was up there with his blood pressure and a misty 'otherness' overtook him. By the time he returned to his car he had fallen in twice, which for a skilled K1 paddler is novice stuff. He knew he was not well, his sense of balance uncertain.

He then mentioned succeeding attempts to return to normal training but he found that even when walking his ability to move at all was interrupted. His GP doctor sent him away with pills but



Norman knew he needed a specialist opinion for which there was a long waiting list. Devizes – Westminster and a planned two week sea kayak trip along the coast of Ireland was not possible. He remembered the Inuk who landed on the beach at Aberdeen 300 years ago. His research revealed answers to questions which intrigued me on and off since 1957. That ‘Finmen’ arrived off the shores of the northern parts of the British Isles there is no doubt, evidence is available from the seventeenth century. Fables of ‘Selkies’ who swim out of the sea as seals then cast off their skin and appear as men are explained as kayaking seal hunters, members of the Inuit, “The People”.

Norman refers to John Heath’s paper on ‘Kayakangst’ or kayak fear when the hunter becomes disoriented on a calm sea, misty, nothing to offer a point of reference for balance. A neurologist tests using electronystagmography. I was a civil servant at a coalpit town on the northeast coast of Durham, Horden. I dealt with disabled men, all ex-miners. One had nystagmus, a disease of the balance system revealed by a rapid flickering of the eyes as if seeking references for balance. The Five-quarter seam at Horden pit is well lit but an inbye can be in stygian darkness utterly black. If the miner’s lamp on his helmet is out, he is in trouble. The miner can experience nystagmus as a passing event but for some it is permanent. Norman had something similar but his brain adjusted to the problem. A lumbar puncture and brain scan were next.

Keeping his condition secret he paddled in the 2003 DW. He and his K2 partner withdrew at Sonning Lock on the Thames. Norman’s inability to do an instant support stroke in the dark compromised safety for them both. That year only 52 of 98 crews completed the course. He returned to his research on the Finmen. He includes long transatlantic voyages, rafts, Lindemann, Romer et al. The problems of sleep in a narrow hunting kayak, defecation, urination are discussed. Nature will not be denied.

Norman was referred to Papworth cardiology unit where a hole in his heart was revealed, probably from birth. The hole was closed remotely through the femoral artery. He returned to research the limiting speed through water of a kayak, obtaining fresh water from floating ice, food from the ocean, the practicality of crossing the North Atlantic, Andrew McAuley’s trans-Tasman attempt and much more. The comprehensive bibliography lists many authorities.

In 2006 he and his paddling partner completed the DW in 36 hours and in 2007 they did it nonstop in 24 hours and 45 minutes. The record set in 1979 is 15 hours 34 minutes. For a man no longer in the fire of youth with a repaired heart that is one huge achievement to which this book is witness. In the exigencies of his life he found another lost Finman, himself.