

Title: *Sticking With It*

Subtitle: *A sea kayak odyssey around Britain*

Author: Rowland Woollven

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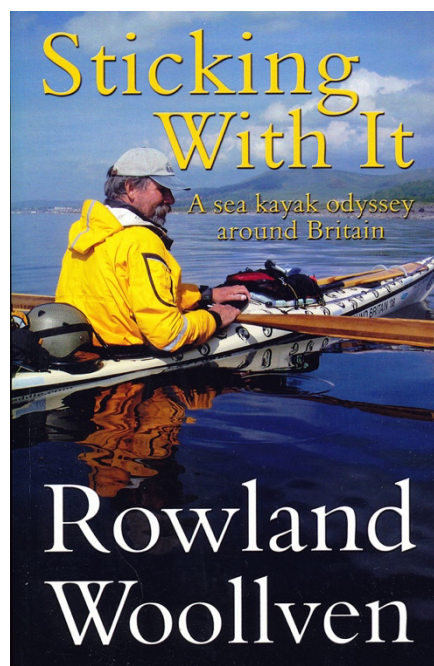
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Review: Paul Caffyn



Despite a few niggles re the writing style and layout, I thoroughly enjoyed this book. After a 35 year career in the British Army, Rowland planned to paddle around mainland Britain, partly to see the coastline of his country and partly a desire to get inside the ‘top 20’ of paddlers to circumnavigate the ‘olde country’. As commander of the Joint Service Mountain Training Centre, in which kayaking was included, his previous experience included kayaking expeditions to Alaska and British Columbia.

At a gathering of paddlers in Wales, he talked about those previous trips and his aim after leaving the army. He said he didn’t mind if it was solo, accompanied, self supporting or a mix of those. Rowland was approached by an outdoor instructor, Cath Tanner, who said she would be interested in doing the trip. They settled on an early summer 2008 start from Ilfracombe in North Devon.

Surprisingly, with no previous paddling experience together, Cath and Rowland made a good team but there was an edge – Rowland had an AF condition, a heart problem when the top chambers of the heart go out of sync with the bottom ones. He had been cleared for the paddle by his cardiologist and GP, was on medication which generally controlled it, and made sure Cath was aware of the condition.

The first two chapters provide the ‘genesis’ and ‘preparations’ for the trip, then the narrative follows the daily grind of early morning starts, rotten weather and long stretches of tidal flats to shore in the evening. Rowland touches on a bit of history, and mostly the good side of meeting locals on the way.

At Cape Wrath, after over-exerting himself running up to Cape Wrath to check on sea conditions, he had an AF event which required a helicopter medevac to hospital in Inverness. A night of drugs, needles and sleep effected recovery. It took six days to progress three miles on that northern coast of Scotland. A rotten run of weather marked 2008.

By 13 September, Rowland and Cath had notched up 1527 nautical miles but had only reached East Anglia, still well north of the Thames Estuary on the east coast of Britain. The forecast for the next five days was terrible, so after tears and talk, they pulled the pin. There is a telling photo of Rowland sitting against a concrete sea wall, chin in hand, looking morose, with a caption, ‘The end of a dream...’.

Rowland went through a bleak post-expedition period, not helped by criticism of some paddlers of an unfinished circumnavigation. Was his expedition a success or a failure? He considered giving up paddling and selling all his kayaking kit, but two mates encouraged him back into a kayak and he began to think about resuming the circumnavigation.

In 2011 Rowland teamed up with a paddling mate Barry, to return to Ilfracombe from East Anglia but the weather was terrible again. They managed only 287 miles in 20 paddling days, for an average of only 14 miles per day.

Still determined to complete the circumnavigation, Rowland teamed up again with Barry in late April 2012, this time with his Barry's wife Wendy. Despite more wretched weather and numerous nasty wet landings, they rounded Lands End, the SW tip of Britain, and with what must have been considerable relief, they reached Ilfracombe – for Rowland, this was after 224 days and 2118 nautical miles.

Considering I did this wee paddle back in 1980 with youngster Nigel Denis in only 85 days, I have nothing but admiration for Rowland in his determination and dogged persistence. Even though there was some doubling back to link in with previous paddling marks, not to mention the time taken, this was a remarkable paddle. He became the oldest at 58 years old, the 19th person to achieve the circumnavigation, and the first to use a stick (Greenland) paddle.

The story is well told, but the paragraphs are way too long. Some taking up most of a page. The maps are very basic with bugger all detail, but to scale. There are black and white photos pages, but mostly drowned in a sea of white with the paper quality losing definition. The choice of colour plates in two sections is good, but they are also drowned in a sea of white – they should have been bled out to the paper margin.