

Title: **Those Magnificent Men in Their Rob-Roy Canoes**

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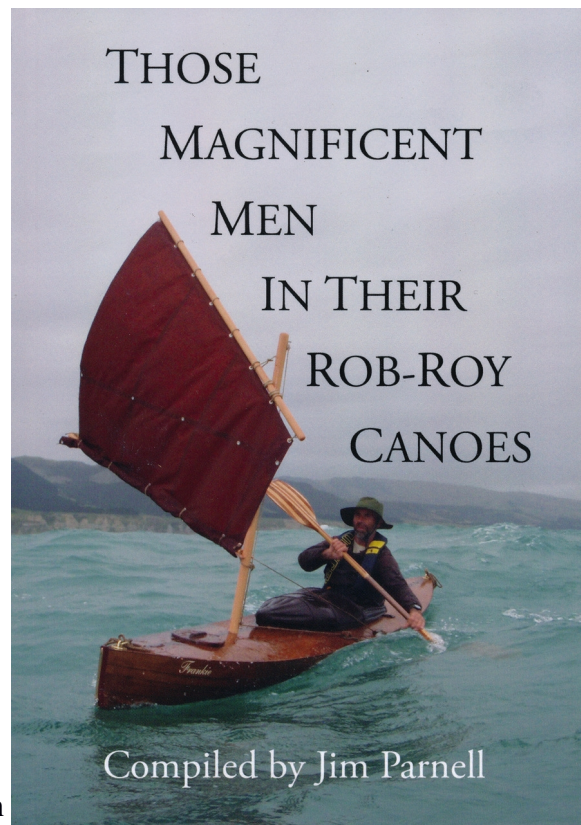
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Review: Paul Caffyn

For paddlers interested in how canoeing (kayaking) in New Zealand developed back in the dark ages, this new title is a worthy addition to your paddling literature collection. There is very little in print re historical paddling apart from the rarely seen *A History of Canoeing in New Zealand 1840 to 1972* by M.E. Fyfe (1972, 2nd edition 1975). Even this has barely a page on the Park brother's first kayak crossing of Cook Strait and their crossing of the South Island from west to east coast.



Back in the late 1980s, I was lent a photocopy of a typewritten 100 page compilation of reports and old newspaper clippings, which had been edited by Peter Lucas from Harihari. It included detailed information on the formation of the Hokitika Canoe Club in 1886 and the incredible paddling trips achieved by George Park and his brother Jim. It was well re-searched and an inspirational read but unfortunately it lacked any photos of George, his kayaks and his trips.

Fortunately, *Flashing Paddles* was computerised in recent times by J.M. Palmer and a small number of copies printed. Jim Parnell, author of this new title saw a copy and decided the story of George Park warranted further research for a book.

From about 1878, a mob of enthusiastic Hokitika paddlers were referred to locally as lunatics, however that stigma was removed on 25 August 1886 with the formation of the Hokitika Canoe Club. There afterwards, their adventures were referred to a daring, brave or foolhardy but not lunatic. The first club commodore was Mr. F.E. Clark who, 20 years earlier, had built the first *Rob Roy* canoe seen in the Antipodes from plans sent to his father in Tasmania by a school chum in England. This chum was in fact Commodore of the Royal Canoe Club in England – John MacGregor - the designer of the *Rob Roy* canoe.

George and his brother Jim built both double and single canoes, using both kauri and kawhaka timber. George was certainly a technical innovator as he was able to construct a sprayskirt to fit over the large cockpits, and a sailing rig but probably most important of all, watertight compartments both fore and aft. George Mannering, who in 1889 had paddled from the Hermitage at Mt Cook to Oamaru, finished his account of this trip with the advice that canoeists should have:

‘Staunch canoes with watertight compartments and such accessories as West Coast canoeists have.’

High praise indeed for George's technical skills and no doubt some envy on the part of those east coast paddlers.

I do like the stories of George paddling from Hokitika to visit his girlfriend at Okarito, also sailing up to Greymouth where he came in over the Grey river bar with all 85 square feet of his calico sail rig up. He must have had a good sense of humour, for as he paddled up river, he was queried as to his ship's cargo, his crew and if he required a cook. Prior to the return trip to Hokitika there were telegraph queries as to the bar depth of the Hokitika River, with the 17 foot bar depth deemed insufficient to allow passage of George's canoe. Then standing off Hokitika, with the bar too bad to enter, George used his 20 pound centreboard as an anchor and slept comfortably offshore under his sprayskirt.

I have often trained for my expeditions out over the Grey River bar and have lost a heap of nervous sweat coming back in. It is a bar I treat with the utmost respect. What an amazing sight it would have been to see George crossing the bar in his 15 foot long canoe with all sail set.

George must have learnt surf skills very quickly from the school of hard knocks, as landing and launching through the surf between Okarito and Hokitika requires great skill. When paddling around the South Island in 2008, Justine Curgenvin – who is one of the most experienced expedition paddlers in the world - capsized three times attempting to land at Okarito but successfully rolled each time. Her movie camera was running at the time. I still find watching the footage raises my pulse rate.

Max Grant, who completed a paddle around the South Island with his daughter Melz in 2010, was also severely trashed when surfing into Okarito. Then a little further up the coast by the Wanganui River mouth, German paddler Freya Hoffmeister nearly broke her kayak in half and lost her paddle when landing through lines of surf. It was the shore bumper dumper that rolled her several times. This says so much about George's skills.

How he learned to roll on his own, with no instructional guides, I find remarkable, especially in such a beamy craft. Even late in life, George was still able to demonstrate his ability to right his canoe after deliberately capsizing.

In addition to the remarkable canoe voyages of the Park brothers, author Jim Parnell includes chapters on '*The Rob-Roy Canoe*' and other land-based adventures of the Park brothers.

George was a skilled craftsman, paddler and adventurer and perhaps, had he not given away paddling for marriage and raising a family, I may not have been the first to paddle around the South Island. George certainly had the skills and ability to do that.

The lovely cover photo, plus photos in the text are from a re-creation trip that Steve Moffatt and Steve Gurney achieved, from the west to the east coast via the Taramakau River, over Harper Pass, down the Hurunui River to the coast, thence down the Canterbury coast to Lyttelton.

The book is sadly let down by the poor choice of text size. It is far too small for older eyes, 9 point or less. The black and white photographs have reproduced poorly. A better quality choice of paper would have helped.

At the book launch in Hokitika, both Steve Moffatt and I spoke about the Park brothers' remarkable paddling adventures. A highlight for me afterwards was when I was encouraged to paddle *Frankie*, Steve's replica of George Park's canoe.