

Chapter 1

The Start Of A Long Affair

Induction and training

When I was five years old, my aunt, recently returned from Canada, assured me that Red Indians parted their hair down the middle in order to balance their canoes. From that day on I had been quite convinced canoes were tippy, unreliable things. So, years later in the 1960s, I was dismayed to find myself taking part in a canoe expedition. Under the impression that I was the instructor of mountaineering, camping and general hillcraft, I had arrived at the Outward Bound Moray Sea School near Elgin in Scotland only to be told that I was scheduled to lead a group on a grand circular expedition which included not only a four-day walk across the Cairngorms (never seeing more than about ten feet ahead of us the whole time because of thick mist), but also 100 miles of cycling, a journey in small boats up the west coast, the rounding of Cape Wrath in the sail-training ship the *Prince Louis* and a canoe trip from one side of Scotland to the other via the Caledonian Canal which links the Moray Firth on the east coast to Loch Linnhe on the west coast by way of Loch Ness, Loch Oich and Loch Lochy. 'But I've never sat in a canoe in my life!' I protested. 'If you're officer material you can lead anything,' was the reply. Another favourite saying of the course commandant was, 'Instructors are expendable, punters aren't.' Like an eighteen-inch welly boot in nineteen inches of water, I was filled with cold dread at the thought of being expended in one of those dangerous vessels. The leader

was really a ‘punter’ in disguise. The expedition was preceded by ten days of training, much of which was aimed at fostering teamwork. For this reason all the canoeing was done in double canoes and the rescue drills were specially designed to involve the whole group. In retrospect, I realise I didn’t learn much that was subsequently of use to me as a reasonably serious sea kayaker, but it whetted my appetite. I had felt the bows lift to a wave, I had felt the sea rolling beneath me and become part of its rhythm. Sitting a few inches below its surface, separated from it only by the thickness of a skin, I experienced an intimacy with the ocean I had known in no other craft – every wave individual, every motion communicated, man and sea with a minimum of technology between. In short, I was hooked for life.

They say that camping is the severest test a marriage can undergo. Couples still wishing to prove a point should try a longish trip in a double canoe. The guy in the bows becomes convinced he is doing all the graft, imagines his partner behind him sitting back enjoying the scenery. Meanwhile, the fellow in the stern is working up a real hatred for the back of the neck and the silly ears which, mile after mile, have been blocking his view, and for the stupid owner of them who is setting a pace that is either too fast or too slow and who is obviously to blame for the fact that the two paddles keep clashing. Not surprising, therefore, that halfway up Loch Lochy one of our group suddenly let out an anguished cry, stood up in the canoe and brought his paddle down on the head of his unsuspecting partner.

Shortly after this summer holiday job as an instructor, I changed schools and took up a new teaching post in Helensburgh, a seaside town on the Firth of Clyde. The house which I shared with my wife, three children and six cats was on the water’s edge. When the tide was up the sea was only two feet away from the end of the garden – ideal for canoeing. Furthermore, the new school, Hermitage Academy, had

amongst its staff a compatible soul, an art teacher named Archie. What neither of us had was a canoe, nor the money to buy even second-hand ones or kits. Then, one lunch hour, we decided to sunbathe on the roof of the four-storey school building. Archie had found a way up to it and a key that fitted a locked door. In a corner of the flat roof, sheets of discarded asphalt material were hiding something. If the thickly made fibreglass effort we uncovered wasn't a bath it must be a double canoe. Together we could hardly lift it. Then, as we removed more of the asphalt, we came across two single kayaks. One was a wooden framework with a thin PVC material stretched over it. Its ribs were fractured, its skin cut and torn. Archie fingered the shiny, wet-look PVC.

'You're the kinky one, this had better be yours.'

The other had been assembled, none too expertly, from a plywood kit. It too was holed and splintered.

Nobody seemed to know anything about the canoes or care whether we made use of them or not. So, the next day, with the aid of our climbing ropes, we lowered the two singles over the edge. Unfortunately, the kinky canoe took a dive from two storeys up onto the tarmac below.

'This puts Cilla Black's nose-job in the shade!' Archie commented.

Several weeks and a great deal of repairing later, came the moment of the launch from the end of my garden. We wore windproof anoraks, T-shirts, shorts and canvas shoes. Welly boots, I had read somewhere, were dangerous, they could fill up with water and drag you down. It was several years before I questioned this myth, several years of canoeing with wet feet quite unnecessarily. For life jackets we sported thick kapok things which had come from the lifeboat of some liner which was being dismantled in the breakers' yard at Faslane on the nearby Gareloch. Sallie, my wife, kissed the patched bows of my kayak. Archie struck a heroic pose, raised a bottle of whisky and quoted:

The sea wants to know – not the size of your ship,
Nor built with what art;
Nor how big is your crew, nor your plans for the trip
But how big is your heart.

We took a slug each, then lifted our craft into the water.

I, of course, was the expert. That is to say, I had actually been in a canoe before. I showed Archie how to get in by sitting on the stern with the homemade paddle out to one side as a stabiliser. We wobbled out into Helensburgh Bay, getting used to the feel and balance of our kayaks. Novice and complete beginner though we were, in fact, we possessed already a fair amount of relevant skills and knowledge. My father had been a keen yachtsman, keeping a boat in Dartmouth and sailing to places like the Channel Isles, Cherbourg, the Isle of Wight. I knew something about the habits of the sea, the tides, a little about navigation and charts and I was used to having an oar in my hand. It still takes me by surprise when I encounter learners in a canoe who haven't grasped the basic principle of which side you paddle if you want to turn, or that paddling in reverse produces the opposite effect.

Archie, too, had grown up near the sea and was used to the ways of small boats. And both of us were mountaineers. We knew about hypothermia and the general clothing and calorie needs of the body in hard outdoor situations; we knew about camping and compass work; and we knew that safety and survival were matters to be taken seriously. Above all, through mountaineering, we had discovered the satisfaction of accepting the challenges posed by rugged terrain or difficult natural conditions, of being self-reliant, the joys of exploration, the magnificence of wild and lonely places, the fulfilment and refreshment of spirit that a day in such an environment can bring. To us, these two old and much-repaired kayaks were a means to an end, a means of reaching further into the unspoilt places, of extending these kinds of experience, of getting to know the sea in the same

way that we knew the ever-changing moods of the mountains of Scotland, and of journeying in one of the most exciting zones the earth can offer – the zone where the elements of land and sea perpetually war with each other.

People enjoy canoeing for reasons ranging from masochism (or is it machoism?) to communion with the gods. Although I have certainly found satisfaction in mastering the techniques and in being able to match my skill and training against the forces of nature, the end rather than the means has always remained the most important thing to me. Whatever your reasons, finding like-minded companions is essential and, in Archie, I had found someone whose attitudes and motivation exactly matched my own. Not that any of this would have been apparent from that first hesitant circumnavigation of Helensburgh Bay. Somewhere out in the middle of the bay Archie said, ‘What about buoyancy?’

‘What?’

‘I doubt if the natural buoyancy of either of these is sufficient for them to keep afloat if they fill up with water.’

‘My God! I never thought of that! Quick! Part your hair down the middle!’

Ever since then I have always checked any canoes in my group to make sure there’s something in bow and stern – air bags, old life jackets, blocks of polystyrene, well-capped empty plastic bottles – to keep them afloat. It’s amazing how the obvious can be overlooked.

The following weekend we decided on a rather longer trip, but one which we thought would be much safer since it was down the placid river Leven, with neither bank too far away. In its own way, it turned out to be a trip full of hazards. The plan was to launch about eight miles upriver at Balloch where the Leven flows out of Loch Lomond towards Dumbarton on the tidal estuary of the Clyde. The first hazard was a group of teenagers in hired dinghies with outboard motors who decided to ‘buzz’ us. Disdainful unconcern failed. Plan B was to beat it as fast as possible. It was

a question of which overheated first, their puny put-put engines or us. Luckily their time must have been up because they suddenly turned round and headed back to Balloch.

Then came a stretch of countryside and, in a particularly shallow section, a herd of cows, knee-deep – do cows have knees? – blocking our way.

‘Just think of them as slalom gates,’ Archie said, heading for the underbelly of a fat Friesian. I wish, for the sake of the story, I could say that he passed between its legs, or that we were holed by a pair of longhorns. The best I can say is that, in a sea kayak, you expect the odd dropping from a seabird to defile your deck, but not . . . Anyway, my death-wish for some kind of spectacular holing was fulfilled by a submerged reef of rusty bedsteads. On the bank I taped up the rip in my PVC while Archie held at bay the pack of wild dogs that run free on most housing estates in these parts.

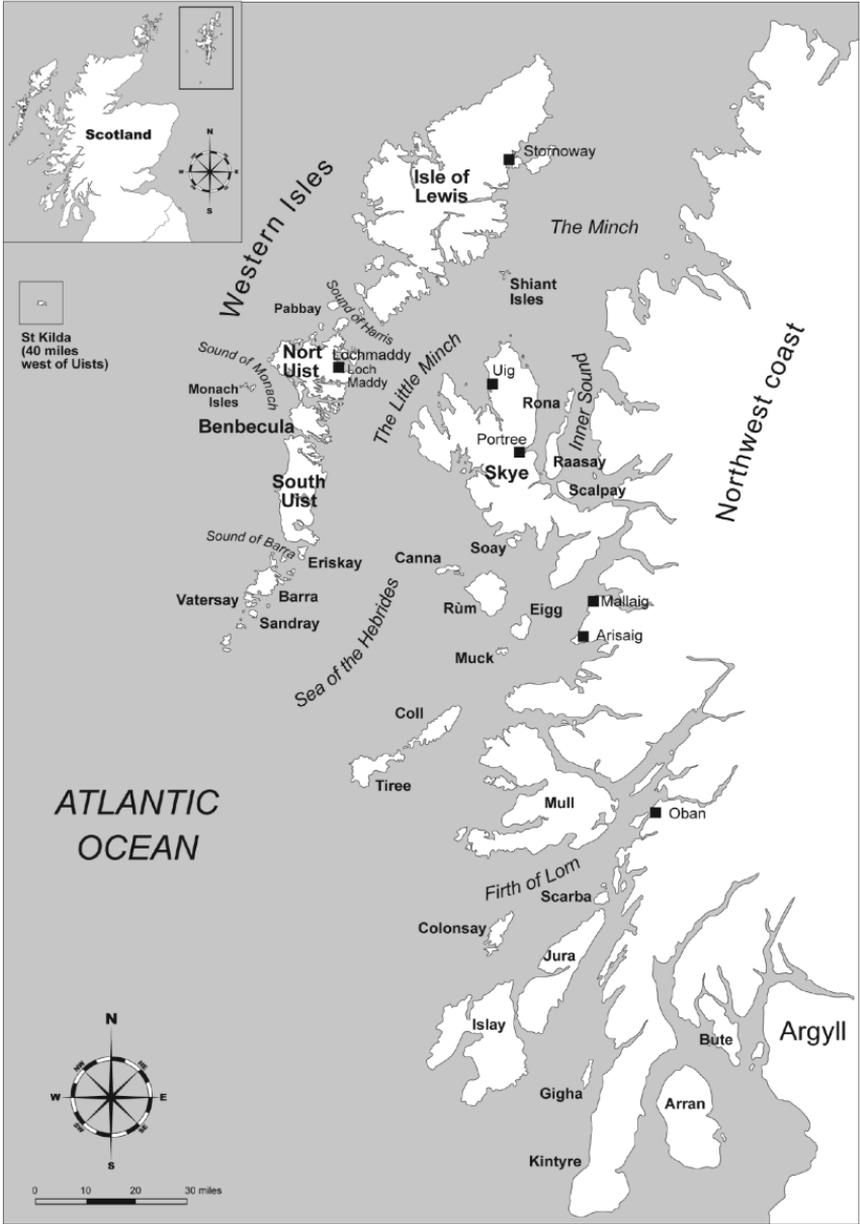
Hardly had we got going again when a horde of pint-sized cowboys ran along the bank, whipping imaginary horses and pointing sticks at us while making firing-type noises and shouting, ‘The last of the Mohicans!’

Stupidly, I raised my paddle as if it were a bow and loosed off a few arrows at them. The response to this was a hail of stones, nothing imaginary about them. This fusillade was maintained for several hundred yards until the two Mohicans finally outstripped them.

There remained the hazard of the bridges. At the first bridge we could be seen approaching from a long way off.

‘Bombs away!’ someone shouted.

The bricks narrowly missed us, sending up columns of spray as in *Sink the Bismarck*. The second bridge was soon after a bend and we were merely spat upon. By the third bridge we were sadder and wiser men, paddling slowly till the last moment, then spurting with a change of angle as we passed beneath it. The fourth and last bridge contained an unexpected surprise. There was a small waterfall where there hadn’t been one when I did my



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reconnaissance – the difference between the level of the river and the tidal waters beyond at high and low water. Allowing ourselves to be swept over the three-foot drop we drifted to the quayside where our pick-up car awaited us.

‘Stick to the sea,’ Archie said. ‘Come wind, come storm, it’s safer!’

Our trips became longer, but always remained within the comparatively sheltered waters of the Clyde Estuary and its adjoining sea lochs. We realised the benefits of spray decks which, worn like skirts and fitted over the cockpit, keep out breaking waves and keep in body heat; and we discovered that a good foot-rest makes all the difference to paddling – a solid base enabling the whole weight of the body to be put into the stroke. As with most people unused to paddling, it took both of us a while to appreciate that the pushing muscles of the arm, shoulder and back are stronger than the pulling muscles and that paddling is more a matter of punching the raised blade forward than of pulling the lower blade back through the water. And we discarded our bulky life jackets for slimmer borrowed ones, more appropriate to paddling, which could be inflated if required. Incidentally, occasionally I observe novices fully inflating their life jackets at the start of an outing. This is not advisable, not only because they are then too bulky for comfortable paddling, but also because, in the event of a capsize, that amount of buoyancy can press a person hard up against the underside of the canoe, making exit difficult. The proper time to inflate it is once you’re out of the canoe and a long wait in the water seems likely. Strictly speaking, this type of jacket is a buoyancy aid until it is inflated and only then does it become a life jacket capable of supporting the head of an unconscious person above the waves. There’s a rather grim joke that the difference between a buoyancy aid and a life jacket is that with the latter your dead body is still afloat when it’s found.

Once we felt reasonably competent, Archie and I went to our headmaster and asked for funds to start a canoe club in the

school. He agreed, on the condition that we went on an approved course and gained our proficiency certificates and instructor's certificates for sea kayaking. The education authority would pay the cost. Thus it was that we found ourselves at the Inverclyde National Recreation Centre at Largs on the Ayrshire coast, on one of the regular courses for the proficiency certificate run by the Scottish Canoe Association.

The course was quite an eye-opener. The less you know the less you realise how much more there is to know. Socrates is reputed to have said that he was the wisest person in the world because he alone knew that he knew nothing. Well, for us, this was the beginning of wisdom. For a start, we were in kayaks that performed so much better than our own, that behaved better in crosswinds and running seas and manoeuvred more easily. Up till this point, a kayak was just a kayak. Now we saw that its design was an important consideration. And then there were the deep-water rescue techniques for getting a capsized person back into his or her kayak. It came home to me that, prior to this, my notion of what to do had been very inadequate indeed. Had either Archie or myself capsized in deep, rough water before going on this course we could well have been in a lot of trouble. It seems incredible now, but neither of us had thought to try out a rescue in shallow water. We had assumed that, if an emergency arose, we would muddle through somehow. Maybe Archie had more faith in me as 'the expert' than I deserved. Another revelation was the whole range of support strokes and draw strokes. I'd had no idea that it was possible to lean on the water with your paddle blade and to push yourself upright again or to make a canoe move sideways. Ian, our instructor, demonstrated that it was possible to lean the canoe over until his ear was in the water and still recover to an upright position. He also demonstrated rolling a kayak. This was not part of the course, but I decided that I would make every effort to master the art as soon as possible. The most valuable thing I learned from Ian was that brute strength

is never a substitute for good technique. A seven-stone woman, with good technique, should be able to empty and right a canoe with a hundredweight or more of water in it. With good technique and timing one can roll up a fully laden kayak almost effortlessly.

Whilst trying all these new strokes, I was averaging about five capsizes a day.

‘Stick to the sea, it’s safer!’ Archie would shout every time my head emerged above the waves.

‘It’s the ones who aren’t capsizing that I worry about,’ Ian said. ‘It means they’re being too timid, they’re not pushing themselves to the limit, not trying to extend themselves.’

‘What if I capsize during the test itself?’ I asked.

‘You won’t be penalised for trying too hard . . . as long as you come up smiling. It’s only the ones who break the surface with panic on their faces who are failed.’

‘As long as you come up smiling!’ became the catchphrase for the course.

This was before the days of kayaks with watertight compartments and bow and stern hatches, so the correct packing of a canoe for a camping trip was an important aspect of the certificate. Part of the test was to pack the kayak as for such a trip, with everything properly wrapped and protected against the sea, then paddle out and capsize. If, on landing, any item of gear was wet, you had failed.

It was like a catechism:

‘What is the correct order of packing your kayak?’

‘The things you need first go in last.’

‘Where does the first-aid kit go?’

‘In the cockpit directly behind your seat where you can reach it.’

‘And where do the spare matches go?’

‘In the centre of your sleeping bag or bedding roll.’

This last was always considered the ultimate in canoeing wisdom.

Towards the end of the course a friend of Ian's, who lived locally, joined us for the day. He had brought along his logbook to show us the trips he'd made and the miles he'd paddled. One entry said, 'Battery Pond, wind force four.' The Battery Pond being an open-air swimming pool on the sea front!

This, too, became a catch-phrase with Archie and me. Whenever conditions looked a bit scary, one or other of us was bound to relieve the tension by shouting, 'Battery Pond, wind force four!' Certainly, it has been my experience over the years that some people who can perform all sorts of wonders and fancy strokes in a heated swimming pool cannot do them when it really counts: in the rough, cold sea, tired and in a fully laden canoe. Anyway, as far as the test was concerned, we both came up smiling.

Two weeks later, after some intensive practice, we were back again for another week's course for the Instructor's Certificate. This time we had the hallmarks of real canoeists: the hard corn in the groove between thumb and first finger where the paddle rotates in the hand, the tell-tale mark in the small of the back caused by the rear of the cockpit, the two worn patches on the outer heels of our canvas shoes, the result of paddling with feet splayed out. There were ten of us on the course. On the first day someone had to quit the course with severe sunburn. On the second day we lost another member of the group who capsized and came up unconscious. He had experienced a close encounter with a jellyfish and, unluckily, had proved to be allergic to its sting . . . On the third day a shoulder was dislocated. And now there were seven. We began to eye each other nervously like potential victims in an Agatha Christie play. On the fourth day one of our lot decided to take his own homemade fibreglass kayak out in rather blustery conditions. It had been made from a mould in two halves, the hull and the top deck being joined with strips of glass bandage and resin along the seam. Somewhere between Largs and Cumbrae Island, the two halves came apart

and the kayak sank. And then there were six. In fact, the owner of the ‘collapsible’ canoe didn’t leave the course, but simply switched to one of the kayaks provided by the SCA. The real victim was Drew who had a tough time instructing such a mad bunch.

When it was my turn to have a go at instructing the others I got them all neatly lined up in their kayaks about twenty yards off the beach while I demonstrated some stroke or other. What was so amusing about my well-planned lesson? I wondered. I soon found out. A paddle steamer was passing close behind me. Its wash carried the lot of us way up the beach, leaving us high and dry.

Drew simply couldn’t get through to us that, instead of putting our heads down and paddling away like mad, we must develop the habit of continually looking around in all directions to see where everyone was, what shipping was approaching, etc. By way of making his point, he gradually dropped behind the group and then sneaked into a little bay. We were more than a mile on before anyone noticed.

I remember the visiting tester asking me, ‘There is a strong onshore wind. What would you do if a member of your group capsizes close to cliffs and is in danger of being smashed to pieces on the rocks?’

‘I wouldn’t have got into that situation in the first place,’ I replied.

I thought that was the only really responsible answer. The expected solution, however, was that you appoint the strongest paddlers in the group to use their towing lines to tow the capsized canoe and its unseated rider further out before going through the usual rescue drill.

I passed, all the same, as did Archie. Soon after that, with the help of Dave Whitelaw from Cumbernauld High School, we set up an evening class for making fibreglass kayaks. It was Dave’s own design, The Tern. Mine was yellow and curving at both ends. Archie wanted to name it the *Banana*, but I named it the

Argo, after the ship in which Jason set out in search of the Golden Fleece.

‘We’ll be the Argonauts of the Western Isles,’ I said. And so, with new kayaks and newly found skills, we were ready, at last, for the major league. Well, almost ready.