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Slow Travels in a Canoe: on Two Recent Narratives by David Gange and Alys Fowler

Abstract
The growing interest in social science research in slow travel has been complemented by emerging attention among scholars of travel writing paid to the phenomenon of the slow journey narrative. To date, there has been significant attention paid to pedestrian journeys, notably in their Romantic manifestations but also in the context of the contemporary return to walking among authors such as Robert Macfarlane, Bernard Ollivier and Sylvain Tesson. This paper turns to a sub-genre that has hitherto attracted limited critical attention, the travelogue that recounts journeys by canoe or kayak. It considers two texts in which canoeing becomes a means of exploring very different parts of the British Isles: Alys Fowler's *Hidden Nature: A Voyage of Discovery* (2018) and David Gange's *The Frayed Atlantic Edge: A Historian's Journey from Shetland to the Channel* (2019). I will argue that, with the first of these focused on the canal networks of Birmingham, the second on the East coast of Great Britain, these very different travelogues nevertheless permit an exploration in the contemporary travelogue of questions of history, slowness, gender and the travelling self.

Keywords: canoe, fractals, kayak, means of transport, slow travel, water

Studies in travel writing has always invited us to consider the broad range of variables that shape the journey narratives we study. When the field, in its early years, was influenced by colonial discourse studies, there was an acknowledgement of the guild identity – in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, ideological assumptions… – that underpinned travellers' worldviews and were reflected in the accounts of their itineraries and those they encountered on them. As Terry Eagleton notes, such an approach to otherness is "of the most fertile of intellectual furrows":

> Indeed, once you have observed that the other is typically portrayed as lazy, dirty, stupid, crafty, womanly, passive, rebellious, sexually rapacious, childlike, enigmatic and a number of other mutually contradictory epithets, it is hard to know what to do next apart from reaching for another textual illustration of the fact. (2002: 2)

Our interdisciplinary approaches have progressively complemented those initial approaches, and challenged the often polarized view of our object of study they generated, by diversifying and increasingly decolonizing understandings of the trav-

elogue, extending our corpus to integrate a broader range of voices, including those of non-European travellers either hidden in plain sight in Western narratives or relegated to immobility as (in Mary Louise Pratt's terms [1994]) "travellees" (see Lindsay 2019; Bracewell, 2024). Criticism now focuses increasingly and quite rightly on the intersectionality of social categories associated with travellers themselves (see, e.g., Mahn 2015). This chapter argues that for a comprehensive understanding of the travelogue, we must at the same time foreground and then integrate variables associated with means of transport. The mode of travel is of course often conditioned by and contingent on the traveller's origins and social status, an observation crucial to puncturing any romanticization of walking (the attraction of which is often directly related to an individual's potential access to other forms of journeying) (Solnit 2000). But a means of transport – ranging from the self-reliance of pedestrianism, via the self-propulsion of the cyclist or canoeist, to the relative passivity of mechanized transport – is an aspect that merits systematic attention. Not only is this key element of the journey historically conditioned and socially conditioning; it also impacts considerably on the phenomenology of travel, in terms of the traveller's velocity, their proximity, their exposure to and contact with the field of travel – and of the travelling subjectivities central to the travel narrative in which all of these result.

The example of a means on which I focus in this chapter is that of the canoe. There is a rich corpus of travelogues recounting journeys by canoe or kayak, two means of transport that, by their very etymologies, of Arawak and Greenlandic origin respectively, reveal the complex histories into which we much tap to understand them.[1] The two journeys on which I intend to focus in this study are both contemporary ones, undertaken in and around the British Isles, and as such belong to a more recent history, usually seen to have been inaugurated by John MacGregor, an English barrister, explorer and travel writer. MacGregor is associated with the development of the first sailing canoes and was also instrumental in introducing canoeing and kayaking as a sport and leisure pursuit in Europe and the USA. Searles of Lambeth, builders of lightweight rowing skiffs, constructed his craft Rob Roy:

> The Rob Roy is built of oak, and covered fore and aft with cedar. She is made just short enough to go into the German railway waggons; that is to say, fifteen feet in length, twenty-eight inches broad, nine inches deep, weighs eighty pounds, and draws three inches of water, with an inch of keel. A paddle seven feet long, with a blade at each end, and a lug sail and jib, are the means of propulsion; and a pretty blue silk Union Jack is the only ornament. (MacGregor 1866: 5)

[1] I note in passing the important need to distinguish between these two types of craft, despite the tendency to conflate them: canoeists use a paddle with a blade at one end only, while propelling a kayak involves using a double-bladed paddle; canoes are open in design while a kayak is closed, sealing the kayaker into the vessel; the canoe is usually a larger and heavier boat, whereas the kayak is smaller and closer to the water, allowing greater speed and as a result the coverage of longer distances.

Crucially, Rob Roy had a very large, open cockpit, allowing for storage of equipment on long journeys, and as the taxonomy above makes clear, it was effectively a hybrid of a canoe and kayak, unwieldy compared to the highly portable kayaks used by the two travellers on whose work I will focus, but nevertheless designed by MacGregor to fit inside the guard vans of trains allowing easy transportation.

The first journey of the Rob Roy took place in summer 1865, when MacGregor paddled down the Thames, across the English Channel and explored the waterways of Western Europe. The resulting travelogue, *1,000 Miles in the Rob Roy Canoe*, appeared the following year and was an instant success with British readers. As part of a broader so-called "Canoe Boom" on both sides of the Atlantic, MacGregor was widely emulated, not least by Robert Louis Stevenson, whose similar journey in France and Belgium in 1876 led to the publication of his first book, *An Inland Voyage*, in 1878. MacGregor himself continued to travel, taking his Rob Roy-type canoes to the Baltic and Middle East, publishing three more books on these journeys. *1,000 Miles in the Rob Roy Canoe* opens with a description of what the author calls: "a new mode of travelling on the Continent, by which new people and things are met with, while healthy exercise is enjoyed, and an interest ever varied with excitement keeps fully alert the energies of the mind" (1866: 1). The benefits he describes are multiple, associated with physical and cognitive well-being, but also foregrounding the role of the means of transport itself – in its novelty and functionality – as a vehicle for facilitating cross-cultural and interpersonal encounter. In extolling the virtues of his vessel, MacGregor underlined its versatility in negotiating the obstacles of varied terrain,

> He can wade and haul the light craft over shallows, or drag it on dry ground, through fields and hedges, over dykes, barriers, and walls; can carry it by hand up ladders and stairs, and can transport his boat over high mountains and broad plains in a cart drawn by a horse, a bullock, or a cow. (1866: 2)

and stressed the access afforded, on the water, to "those very parts where the scenery is wildest and best [that are usually] quite unapproachable in an open boat" (1866: 2). His conclusion is that – given this facilitation of access to the often-inaccessible – canoeing is as a result of a superior means of transport when compared to other forms of deceleration and self-propulsion: "in walking you are bounded by every sea and river, and in a common sailing-boat you are bounded by every shallow and shore; whereas, I was in a canoe, which could be paddled or sailed, hauled, or carried over land or water to Rome, if I liked, or to Hong-Kong" (1866: 15).

The "pretty blue silk Union Jack" (1866: 5) that adorned Rob Roy is a marker of the context in which MacGregor travelled. The flag – known as the "Butcher's Apron" by many of those colonized by the British, as the lyrics of a rebel song by the Irish band The Wolfe Tones makes clear – reflects an imperial mindset evident throughout the travelogues of the later nineteenth century: MacGregor's initial jour-

neys were in Western Europe, but he belongs to a specific ideological niche, evident in his manifest failure to acknowledge the role of the canoe in indigenous cultures around the world. There is one reference to "the single-bladed paddle, of which I have had experience in Canada and New Brunswick with the Indians in bark canoes and log canoes" (1866: 312), but his narrative betrays otherwise a cultural arrogance surrounding what is presented as a singular Victorian invention. It seems appropriate to read MacGregor contrapuntally, alongside the contributors to a recent collection of essays on *The Politics of the Canoe*. Offering a "multifaceted examination of a vessel that, while structurally simple, is remarkably complex in its meanings" (Erickson and Krotz 2021: x), the chapters explore the historical role of the canoe in settler-Indigenous relations while focusing also on its role in current debates about decolonization, reconciliation, governance and sovereignty. The earliest travellers in Canada understood the "logistical value" of canoes, smaller and less clumsy than their own boats, meaning that the (mostly Indigenous) paddlers of the vessels played a key role in "negotiat[ing] the terms of habitation and trade in a relatively new world of cooperation and conflict" (2021: 5).

It was urbanization and mechanization that pushed the canoe into the leisure sphere, with the "recreational canoe", largely evacuated of its colonial connotations and "erasing its own politics" (Erickson and Krotz 2021: 4), becoming even in the early twentieth century, in the phenomenon of "canoedling", an increasingly policed site of sexual liberation (2021: 10). At the same time, however, this association with leisure led to the vessel becoming "synonymous with Canada and Canadian wilderness" (2021: 5), privileging the benefits of canoeing that have historically attracted many travellers to the means of transport: "paddling is appealing because it frees us from the burdens of thought, its meditative rhythm interrupted only by the occasional speculation about what we might see around the next bend in the river" (Erickson and Krotz 2021: 6). Alternative narratives are emerging, not least from the protests of "kayaktivists" associated with environmental struggle whose collective action repoliticizes the myth of "individual freedom of movement and opportunity" (Erickson and Krotz 2021: 10). This tendency is evident elsewhere, not least un the work of Nick Hayes (2020) who sees canoeing as part of a broader "right to roam" (Horton 2022). The editors of *The Politics of the Canoe* conclude:

> Canoes influence how we engage with and interpret our histories and physical environments. Agents of freedom and autonomy, they embody individual as well as collective expressions of – and interventions in – these histories. Canoes are more than objects; they are beings that animate our relationships to each other and to the world. (Erickson and Krotz 2021: 21)

In exploring such relationships of humans, environments and means of transport, travel narratives continue to be a key resource. Accounts of journeys by kayak or canoe are extensive, going back to some of the later nineteenth-century examples

already cited above, but culminating in a proliferation of contemporary travelogues that blend a nostalgia for adventure and parallel interest in reaching the otherwise inaccessible with a marked ecological sensitivity and commitment to sustainable travel. The broader corpus is a varied one, including earlier works such as Alastair Dunnett's *Quest by Canoe: Glasgow to Skye* (1950), a text that combines a sense of the democratization of travel writing in the interwar period with an understanding that travel writing may play a political role in rediscovering minoritized cultures. Paul Theroux's *The Happy Islands of Oceania* (1992) – tellingly subtitled *Paddling the Pacific* – attempts to use a collapsible kayak to approach the region in news ways, seeking in the process to demythologize narratives of places central to European exoticism. Recovery of an earlier tradition of colonial travel is evident in works such as the ex-Marine Phil Harwood's *Canoeing the Congo* (2012), an account of the first source-to-sea descent of the Congo river through the Democratic Republic of the Congo whose intertextual dialogue with Joseph Conrad and Henry Morton Stanley give a clear sense of the discourse of adventure travel to which it belongs. A more ecological sensitivity – reminiscent of an earlier tradition of canoe-based travelogues, such as John Graves's *Goodbye to a River: A Narrative* (1959), a conservationist account of his journey on the Brazos river in Northern Texas at a time when a series of dams were proposed – is to be found in other recent examples, notably Adam Weymouth's *Kings of Yukon: An Alaskan River Journey* (2018). This is a text that provides an account of a search for the Chinook salmon along the Yukon River, through north-western Canada, Alaska and into the Bering Sea. At the intersection of travel writing and nature writing, Weymouth uses the canoe-based narrative to reflect on environmental change and the relationship between human and nature.

This chapter focuses on two travelogues from within this wider corpus, David Gange's *The Frayed Atlantic Edge* (2019) and Alys Fowler's *Hidden Nature* (2018). Divergent in terms of narrative voice, travelling method and chosen geographical context, these are nevertheless accounts that illustrate the potential of journeys by kayak to permit new approaches to *domestic* space. Gange's text – an account of journeys across a period of twelve months along an arc of the Atlantic coastlines of Scotland, Ireland, England and Wales – actively situates itself in a longer tradition of travelogues reliant on this means of transport. In its chapter on Argyll, he refers to the work of Alastair Dunnett (cited above), for instance, and underlies its role in the establishment of a British tradition of kayaking literature as well as in the establishment of travel writing as a form of political intervention, "publicising the plight of places and trades that the nation seemed to sideline" (Gange 2019: 191). Gange is an academic by profession, and kayaking serves as a research methodology (his subtitle is *A Historian's Journey from Shetland to the Channel*). A personal narrative of sea travel is thus complemented by archival research, literary criticism and ecological reflection. His narrative is based on the following premise: "the significance of coasts is consistently underestimated, and the potential of small boats to make sense of their histories is rarely explored" (Gange 2019: ix). Kayaking is adopted as a

form of "slow travel", but specifically associated with "establishing sounds, smells, sights and stories of the venerable tradition of travelling at sea level" (Gange 2019: 1). On the blog associated with the book, Gange evokes historians' interest in the "archive of the feet" or the role of psychogeography as a means of "understand[ing] the people of the past by tracing their footsteps".[2] Countering such "muddy-booted history" (Gange 2019: 143) with an emphasis on what he calls the "watery" nature of the past, he proposes "self-powered boats" as "wonderful tools [that] make places accessible […] where few other vessels can land".

There is no doubt that Gange's journey belongs to a neo-Romantic strand of contemporary travel writing, an aspect evident in the book's conclusion that privileges a "romanticism which delves into the natures of humans and their fellow species, finding wonder while rooted in the real' (2019: 347). Gange stresses the danger of his undertaking, the physical exhaustion he faces ('the tension in the arms as they pull a paddle through water" [2019: 61]), the way in which – through a 'sense of connection with the boat" (2019: 36) – the kayak plays a prosthetic function, becomes an extension of his travelling body. Such a tradition is often gendered, as Kathleen Jamie makes clear in her critique of the "lone enraptured male" (2008). The target of her comments, Robert Macfarlane, not only provides an endorsement for Gange ("remarkable", he notes), but is also cited in the book itself as the target of Jamie's critique, in which she accuses him of "quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with civilised lyrical words" (Jamie 2008: 26). Gange sees in Macfarlane's work a response, the emergence of "a far more purposeful fusion of living histories with active nature" (2019: 114). It is such an approach that underpins his own work, with the kayak serving as a tool facilitating such an art of travel.

The small boat provides a proximity to nature, with seals coming "close enough for long whiskers to brush the kayak, their gentle breath audible as they surfaced" (Gange 2019: 81), or with "the water round the kayak boil[ing] and rip[ping] as shoals of mackerel rise and change direction in a single fluid flick" (2019: 167). The sea-level view is associated also with immersion: off Orkney, Gange describes himself as "surrounded by the boom of breaking waves, listening hard for corridors of silence through the noise" (2019: 83). In this multisensory experience, soundscapes are privileged, but on returning to teaching duties in Birmingham, what Gange lacks is something more kinetic: "What I missed most was immersion in constant movement: the world view from low in the wave. I missed the sense of being part of a vast, constant dynamism" (2019: 339). These affective and phenomenological reflections on kayaking are allied with a broader commitment to deploying the small boat to counter what he dubs "thalassophobia" (2019: 205) and to develop new perspectives on the interaction of land and sea in an "ocean-wide, aquapelagic, world" (2019: 88). On the one hand, his slow, sea-based approach permits a form of microtravel as he perceives detail occluded by "land-locked approaches

[2] See https://frayedatlanticedge.wordpress.com/kayaking/

to twenty-first-century life" (2019: 211).[3] His reference to the "busy fractals of the west [that] slow the eye" (2019: 342) appear to be an oblique reference to the work of Benoit Mandelbrot, whose "How long is the coastline of Britain" serves as a reminder that ever-increasing attention to detail reveals the so-called "coastline paradox", according to which the length of natural geographical phenomena increase exponentially the more closely we observe them: "with greater detail, subbays and sub-subpeninsulars appear, and so forth. Each adds to the measured length" (1983: 26). The kayak is also a tool of encounter, "a ticket of admittance to an island community" (Gange 2019: 292), permitting access to coastal societies and the stories of which they are repositories:

> To begin to observe the past from the water is, of course, a tiny step in the grand scheme of rethinking histories to speak to a world in which crises and concerns can't always be addressed within familiar frameworks. But coastal pasts allow us to recognise the intertwining of human and ocean worlds as well as the many trajectories that have led our communities to this fractured present. They are thus good places to start. (2019: 344)

The result is an acknowledgement that "observing from the sea can transform perspective" (2019: 120), that "the nature of Britain is changed from the sea" (2019: 336).

Central to Gange's reflections is the cartographic distinction between land maps and sea charts:

> Like the maps themselves, my study of land and sea was split. Each took place in a different time and space, making use of a different resource. Yet actual planning and travelling meant subverting the split resource. I read sea maps from land and land maps at sea […] as I followed the seams where the two conjoin. (2019: 240)

Alys Fowler's own kayaking travelogue, *Hidden Nature*, similarly focuses on remapping, albeit on a different scale, as she uses her small inflatable boat to rediscover Birmingham, the city in which she lives, through its network of canals – and in the process to discover aspects of her own identity: "The best maps are not published, are not accurate or even sensible, but are the maps we make ourselves, about our cities, towns, villages and landscapes, our kith and kin. They are made up of private details that allow us to navigate our past as well as our current terrain" (2018: 32).

The works by Gange and Fowler are both textual traces of the recent boom in kayaking as a leisure activity. They both deploy the small boat as a tool of encounter and means of altering perspectives on the everyday. There is an unexpected connection between their accounts. Whereas Gange's sea-kayaking is a way of escaping

[3] On microtravel, see Forsdick, Kinsley and Walchester 2024.

the routines of life in Birmingham as he travels along the "frayed Atlantic edge", for Fowler the kayak is the means of ostensibly more modest journeys in the city itself. Gange's romanticism, evident in repeated descriptions of the lone traveller immersed in the elements, is juxtaposed with a water-borne practice of urban exploration. Complaining to a friend about her "city-bound" existence, Fowler is told by a friend to "[c]limb the tallest building and spend the night under the stars on its summit, circumnavigate the city limits by cycle, canoe the canals" (2018: 4). It is the third option that she adopts, accessing in the process an urban landscape hidden in plain sight: "He told me of places thick with waterlilies and the flowering rush, *Butomus umbellatus*, of large pikes and eels, of disused waterways, hidden tracks and ghost canals, filled in under shopping malls and housing developments" (2018: 6).

Fowler is as far removed as one could imagine from being a "lone enraptured male". She also cites intertexts, but they link her to an alternative corpus of female kayakers, notably Audrey Sutherland, author of the account of a journey off Alaska, whose mantra of "Go simple, go solo, go now" inspires her to access "a wilderness out there to explore, even if it was bound by my city limits" (2018: 16). Purchasing her pack raft ("a sort of adult blow-up dinghy, a miniature kayak if you like, that can pack down into a rucksack and thus be carried for part of the journey" [2018: 15–16]), Fowler is aware of the gendered nature of the activity with which she intends to engage. The website of the shop supplying it is "full of burly men white-water-rafting down impossible rivers" (2018: 15). Her initial amateur attempts to travel in what she calls "a thousand pounds' worth of blow-up plastic" (2018: 15) are marked by a clear sense of bathos: Fowler describes herself as "pleased to sit in it on my sea of carpet and pretend to paddle" (2018: 17), and when she eventually gets on the water, she ends of drenched and spinning in circles. With practice, however, she becomes an adept explorer of Birmingham's canal network, discovering a hidden city via this industrial heritage, "undervalued and underused, a neglected resource" (2018: 221). The urban travelogue primarily becomes a memoir, and these urban journeys accompany not only the breakdown of Fowler's marriage, but also the acceptance of her identity as a gay woman.[4] As she discloses her sexuality to her husband, the metaphorical function of her chosen mode of travel becomes clear:

> Then one day, this other part of me, sat at the edge of our bed, turned to H and said, 'I'm gay.' Or maybe bisexual, somewhere in that grey middle. I was paddling out to a place that might be white or maybe it was blue-grey, like the gloaming before night, or pale grey, like the first light on a cloudy morning, but out I paddled. (2018: 78–79)

[4] The editors of *The Politics of the Canoe* note the emergence of all-women trips run by groups such as Wild Women Expeditions, reminiscent of the stories of nineteenth-century Canadian settlers such as Susanna Moodie. Such journeys create spaces, they claim, 'outside the bounds of patriarchal and heteronormative society' (Erickson and Krotz 2021: 12).

The early twentieth-century French traveller Victor Segalen claimed: "un voyage au loin […] n'était qu'un voyage au fond de soi" [a distant journey was only a journey to the depths of the self] (1995: II, 880), and this parallel becomes clear as the deeply personal dimensions of Fowler's urban exploration emerge: "I see now that this journey on the water was about finding an external correlation to my inner world. I needed a transmutable world, a fluid space that would allow me to make my own changes" (Fowler 2018: 223).

In the concluding chapter of *The Politics of the Canoe*, Danielle Gendron reflects on the canoe as research vessel and methodological tool. She focuses on the multisensory experience of canoeing, i.e., the ways in which it can function as a connection between the past and present of place, and underlines the ways in which the "paddle acts as an extension of our bodies" (Gendron 2021: 221), with this prosthetic function leading to a situation in which "the distinction between humans and the natural world become blurred" (221). Gange and Fowler both opt not for the canoe but for the kayak, but their very different accounts converge around these methodological functions of their chosen vessel as a means of exploring the world, the self and the interactions between the two. Their texts are an invitation for us to reflect more comprehensively on the multifaceted role of means of transport in the travelogue, the ways in which these means of transport intersect with other characteristics of the traveller, and the distinctive velocities, vectors and viewpoints that inevitably emerge.

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