



The MacGREGOR PADDLE CHALLENGE



John MacGregor M.A., Trinity College, Cambridge; (1825-1892) Barrister-at-Law, Captain of the Royal Canoe Club, through his extremely popular books and magazine articles from 1865 to 1892, practically invented the sport of canoeing (or kayaking).



The beginning of recreational canoeing can be traced directly to an Englishman, called John MacGregor, in the middle of the nineteenth century. He was a man with a penchant for boat design and exploration, who developed his craft based on the Eskimo Kayak, which he named *Rob Roy*. He took the boat on long journeys along the rivers and across the lakes of Europe, lecturing and writing about his travels as he went. His tales attracted quite a following and soon there were many kayaks in Great Britain based on his kayak design that is still referred to as a *Rob Roy*.

Canoes are the larger category under which kayaks fall: while all kayaks are canoes, not all canoes are kayaks. Paddlers in kayaks sit with their legs stretched out in front of them and canoeists generally paddle from a kneeling position. Most canoes are open hulled; while kayaks have covered decks. Canoe paddles are typically single bladed, while kayak paddles are double ended.

Some might say these differences occur because of the type of water available, but a look at the evolution of British canoeing culture during the past one hundred and twenty years would suggest that the major changes are due to those who have written and taught, coupled with the availability of canoes or kayaks.

The first period from 1865 evolved from the founder of British canoeing, John MacGregor. His book, *A Thousand Miles in the Rob Roy Canoe*, fired the imagination of the Victorians. The '*Rob Roy*' was a stable kayak, went in a straight line and had a large cockpit. Made of wood, it was easy to handle and a boat in which any beginner would have felt safe. In this period, wooden canoes were imported and were used for family outings and touring, the limitation to the growth was the cost of the wooden craft.

The second period from the 1930s to the 1950s is identified with the wooden frame and canvas kayaks and the start of the BCU Coaching Scheme. Percy Blandford(1912-2014) wrote books and produced a host of designs for the Scout movement, which brought canoeing to a much wider number of people. The low cost, make-it-yourself PBK (Percy Blandford Kayak) designs, were, like the '*Rob Roy*', stable, went in a straight line, and had large cockpits. The BCU Coaching Scheme was

started in the 1950s by John Dudderidge. The original proficiency tests were designed around the use of the open cockpit straight-line kayak.

The third period, which had a massive impact on both the expansion and the change in direction of British canoeing culture started around the early 1960s, when in 1962, the BCU appointed its first Director of Coaching, Oliver Cock, giving added drive to what was to become a very powerful teaching scheme. For various reasons, the Coaching Scheme became more and more interested in rough water canoeing. At the same time, glass reinforced plastic became available. Moulds were produced for the home builder and the designs reflected the interest in rough water. Thousands of kayaks were produced with rockered hulls and small cockpits. By 1980, the Coaching Scheme had 3,000 members almost all teaching in the close fitting cockpit kayak. So powerful had that culture become that, if the word 'canoeing' is mentioned to almost anyone in Britain, their immediate image would be that of a young man or woman strapped into a kayak, wearing a crash helmet and wetsuit, performing turns and rolls on rapidly moving rivers. This was a great image for the adventurous teenager but daunting for many others who might wish to paddle. Indeed, a far, far cry from the canoeing of MacGregor.

MacGregor spent part of his youth in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where his father was stationed in the 1830s in a fort. He may have picked up some canoeing experience there.

Reading his books one notices he carried in his canoe a number of religious tracts (in a movement called "Muscular Christianity") written in the local language and was always ready to hand them out. He did not travel on Sundays, but did lecture on his travels and gave much of the profits to charities, especially to boys in the inner cities.

He published accounts of several other canoe cruises, including one to Scandinavia and another to Jordan and Egypt. The appendix to that book gives some construction details for his canoe designs.

His wooden split paddles were presented to Royal Canoe Club in 1959. Subsequently these were used as the trophy at the BCU National Inter-Club Sprint Racing Regatta, being first presented in 1977 to the winning club Fladbury and is still fought over annually.

The original 'Rob Roy' canoe was built in 1865 by Thames boatbuilders Searle & Sons of Lambeth for John MacGregor's tour of Europe, the subject of the bestselling book 'A Thousand Miles in a Rob Roy Canoe' and is now preserved at the River and Rowing Museum, Mill Meadows, Henley on Thames, Oxfordshire, RG9 1BF, UK. It is clinker built with an oak hull and cedar deck.