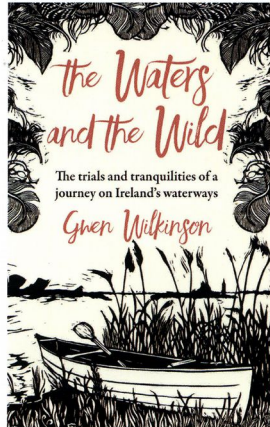


THE WATERS AND THE WILD

By Gwen Wilkinson



Gwen Wilkinson with her book and hand built canoe *Minnow* at Float to the Fleadh with organiser Denis Baker.

The waters and the wild provides the reader with a new and refreshing travelogue of a journey on the inland waterways of Ireland, not by motor cruiser, as one may expect but by canoe and a hand built one at that. *Minnow* as the name suggests is small (12ft (3.6m) in length) but far from insignificant as she safely carries the author, Gwen Wilkinson, along the myriad of waterways we are so lucky to have in this country. From the vast expanses of loughs to the narrow confines of the canals and their feeder channels; *Minnow* holds up well to the task demanded of her.

From the opening chapter it is already clear that in crafting her own canoe Gwen is a more than capable woman but to then go on and explore the waterways alone takes it to another level.

Having only limited experience of paddling myself, although enjoyable, I am fully aware of how vulnerable one can feel being so close to and in the water. While needing to be vigilant of other craft, weather conditions and so many other things this type of travel brings great advantages; close up encounters with wildlife being one of the best and this tale doesn't disappoint on that front. The author recalls sightings of mink, otter and plenty of birdlife; curlew, lapwing, kingfisher and egret to name but a few. Plant life too is noted in detail.

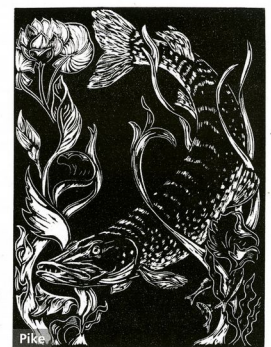
What makes this read refreshing are the links to so many inspirational women; both in folklore and real life. The author cleverly weaves these tales into her own story like one of the meandering

river courses she travels on. The likes of some of these women I knew about; Queen Maeve, Jane Shackleton and Lady Harriet Kavanagh of Borris House but many I did not. Tales I personally found of interest included that of Emily Williamson, Eliza Phillips and Margaretta 'Etta' Lemon, the inspiration behind what today is known as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) but the simple tale of Margaret Haughey, the bread woman, was the one which touched my heart.

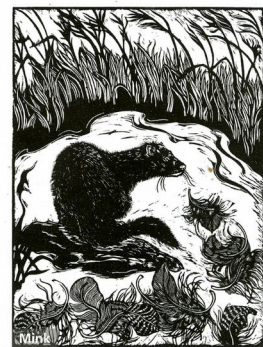
This book is not just for the female of our species, however, as Gwen also touches on some iconic males; St Molaise, St Brendan the navigator, the Old Croghan Man, Walter and his family of Watty's Lock fame, Ecologist Tom Lawrence, Sir Ernest Shackleton and more. It is not until



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page 159 is reached that Gwen reveals her early connections to the waterways, her parents being the custodians of two heritage barges, 76M and 42B, and later, a succession of narrowboats. I personally would have liked to learn more about this but perhaps it is for another time and place.

Throughout, the book is generously enhanced with the author's black and white artwork – stunning lino and woodcut prints – that add yet another dimension to what is already a good read and makes the reader realise that Gwen is just



as inspirational and talented a woman as those she connects with on her travels. There are also illustrated maps enabling the reader to plot the author's journey.

Gwen is not shy in expressing her emotions on this epic journey, which is undertaken in sections rather than in one hit. I found myself both laughing and crying at her encounters, feeling the same happiness as she in the simplest of things, the frustration at times, as well as fear. At one point, this had me sitting on the edge of my seat and biting my lip during an encounter with a particularly ferocious operator of a weed cutter on the Barrow Line of the Grand Canal!

By the end, the author feels as if her travels with *Minnow* have reached satisfactory closure but what lies beyond the final lock gates appears to fire great curiosity. Somehow I have the feeling



that this is not the last we have heard from the talented Gwen Wilkinson and her new sail boat *Pearl*. I wish her well with any continued watery travels that are on the agenda and look forward to reading the next instalment.

Reviewed by Alison Alderton, IWN Editor
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Editors choice



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