

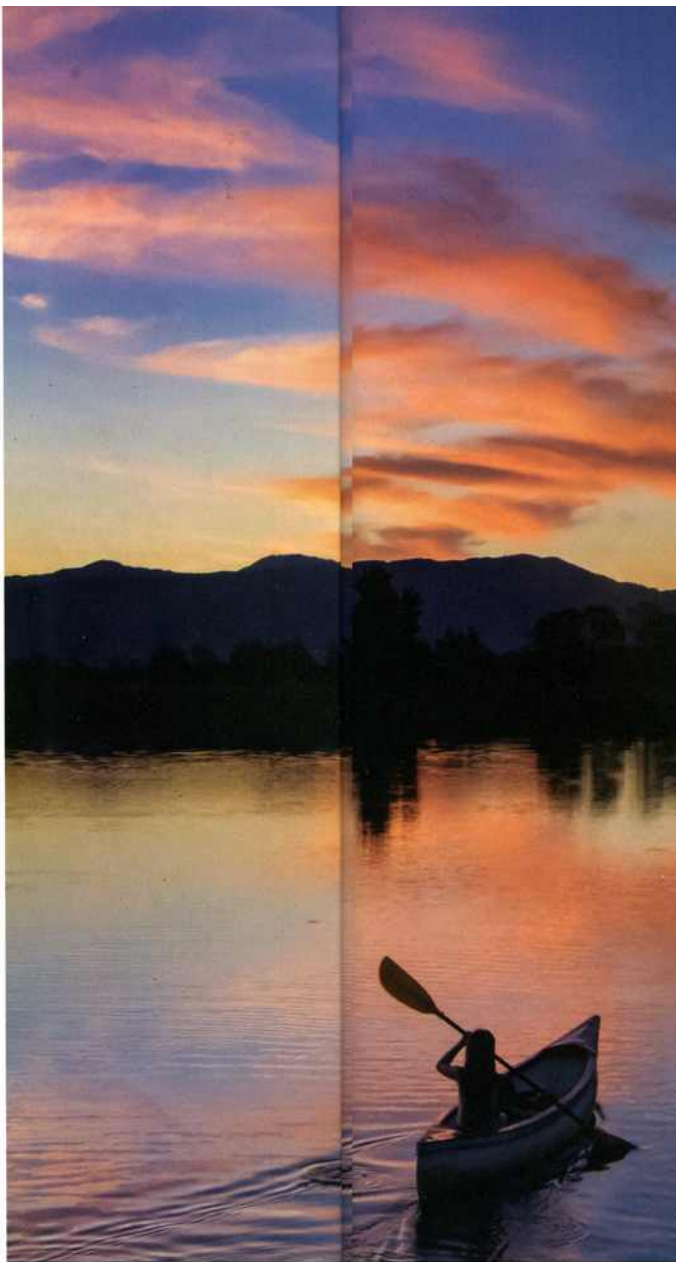


Silent passage

Artist and writer **Gwen Wilkinson** built a canoe and paddled it the length of Ireland. As she launches the book that tells her invigorating story, she reflects on her adventure

The hollowed husk of Minnow's elongated body is a potent symbol of expectation: its silent presence an invitation to venture out from these wild shores and journey ever onwards. Vivid images of utopian worlds play across my imagination. I reach out and touch the smooth surface of the hull, which is reassuringly taut beneath my fingertips. I alone lay claim to her. She is the vessel of my dreams, carrier of my desires.

I have yet to enter the water. Sitting beside my canoe on the northern shores of Lower Lough Erne, I like to think I am biding my time, waiting for just the right moment, but really, I am stalling. Having spent the past four months shaping this canoe, bringing her into this world, I was full of impatience to take her to the water and begin our journey. Now I'm tense, nervous and riddled with self-doubt. The view before me is intimidating: an exposed sea of open water, known locally as the Broad Reach, quivers in the bright sun.



In planning this voyage, I knew that if I was to have any chance of crossing this daunting stretch of water, the conditions would have to be perfect, and today they are just that. Last night in my tent, holding out for the weather to turn in my favour, I felt the wind die. This afternoon the air is breathless and the water as smooth as liquid silver. A benign and languid waterway with mysterious islands waiting to be explored. The time has come, so I climb inside the hull of my very small boat, take up the twin-blade paddle and begin to journey up the River Erne.

In 2019, I set myself the challenge of building a canoe and paddling it the length of Ireland along a network of inland waterways. With Minnow, my 12-foot, open, wooden canoe, I set out from the shores of Lough Erne in Northern Ireland and navigated a 400km journey to the tidal waters of the River Barrow in the South.

It was never my intention to write a book, but as the adventure evolved, I felt there was a story unfolding that needed to be shared. *The Waters and the Wild* describes the interwoven histories of the people, places and wildlife that shaped my journey.

Travelling by canoe opened up a whole new world of possibilities from wild camping on deserted islands and river banks to exploring historic monuments such as those found on Devenish and White Island. With its low perspective and silent passage, paddling a canoe is the essence of slow adventure. Everyday concerns were shelved as the waterscape absorbed my attention. Long stretches of the voyage were spent listening, watching and savouring the wildlife around me. Encounters with curlew, otter, pike and kingfisher inspired a creative urge that spilled over into my artwork when I completed the voyage.

Researching my waterways adventure, I uncovered a cast of characters, mostly women, whose life stories inspired me on my journey. During a challenging few days on the Shannon - Erne Waterway, I found inspiration in the tale of Leitrim-born Margaret Gaffney, who emigrated to America in 1818, built a successful business empire and ploughed her fortunes back into the community, building orphanages and homeless shelters.

Descending the River Shannon, I came across the history of the 'swimming suffragettes', pioneering women who campaigned for equality in swimming, as until the 1920s it was against the law for women to swim in lakes and rivers. Paddling along the River Barrow I learned about Lady Harriet Kavanagh of Borris House who travelled extensively through the Middle East and in 1845 founded the Borris Lace industry, the crafting of which continues to this day. Their stories, along with many others, who have contributed to the fields of nature, science, environmental conservation and the arts are woven through the book's narrative.

Our rivers and canals are corridors of immense wildlife diversity, brimming with life above and below the waterline. As a recreational amenity they are a welcome escape for boaters, cyclists and walkers. Considerable investment has gone into making stretches of our inland waterways paddle-friendly — pods of canoes and SUPs are an increasingly familiar sight. On my local river, the Barrow, several canoe hire outfits offer guided and self-guided trips. Exploring Ireland's waterways does not have to be as wild and challenging an undertaking as mine. Hundreds of kilometers of towpaths are being improved for cyclists and walkers — the Grand Canal and Royal Canal Greenways are almost complete. I would encourage everyone to take time out and appreciate this very special environment even if it is just for an afternoon stroll.

I paddled to explore, searching for inspiration and a desire to learn more about the island I inhabit. I met with experiences rich and unexpected. **icm**



The Waters and the Wild by Gwen Wilkinson, published by Merrion Press, is out now.