

Where the wandering water gushes

A yearning for adventure led Gwen Wilkinson on a solo journey through Ireland's waterways in a canoe made by her own hands. She shares her experience of exploring this familiar landscape from an unfamiliar perspective.

words and illustrations Gwen Wilkinson



Like the other wild creatures around me, I wake early, a sixth sense propelling me from my warm earthen nest. The fog comes as quite a surprise when I unzip the tent door shortly after dawn. It was not a factor I had ever considered or even read about, but, then again, the conditions are perfect for it: warm water, cool air. The river smoke is dense, billowing and saturating. Visibility is less than ten metres; I know the river is there – I just can't see it. So much for an early start. Dressed and ready for action, I find myself grounded and forced to stay under canvas.

The veil lifts slowly, revealing a heavy and windless day. I fill the canoe with my belongings and pass a final glance over last night's camp. The flattened grass where I had lain curled has already sprung back to life. I push the canoe across

the meadow towards the river. The dragging hull and my bare footprints leave deep impressions in the soft, muddy shoreline, like the imprints of some giant tetrapod from Devonian times. I clasp the smooth oak thwart and guide the hull through the shallows in search of clear water. Somewhere in the rushy beds a heron shrieks, waterfowl scatter and lapwings pipe. Lingering clouds of river smoke drift above the lough, thin wisps condensing and dissolving in the warming midsummer air. I slip into the canoe, take up the paddle and dip the blade tips lightly into the peaty water. Swiftly and silently the canoe glides out across the lough in search of Otherworlds. (Lough Ree, River Shannon)

– extracted from *The Waters and the Wild*

In 2019, I set myself the challenge of building a canoe and paddling it the length of Ireland along a network of inland waterways. Since early childhood, I have been exploring waterways, from canal and river journeys on board my parents' barge to transatlantic crossings on ocean-racing yachts. Youthful nomadic wanderings gradually diminished in favour of a more routine way of life, until one day, a leisurely trip with friends in a hired canoe on the River Barrow stoked familiar yearnings for more waterways adventure. Enchanted by the experience of our riverine immersion, I craved for more. Browsing through maps, I discovered that a vessel could navigate a continuous 400-kilometre journey on this island's inland waterways. The desire to attempt such a voyage became irresistible.

A common narrative of the great navigational tales, be they Greek epic, Scandinavian saga or Celtic immram, sees the hero building the vessel on which they will embark. Odysseus, with Calypso's aid, took four days to build the raft on which he set sail from the island of Ogygia. St Brendan, hero of the legendary Celtic voyage tale the *Navigatio*, built himself a currach, a traditional boat composed of a lattice frame, over which he stretched cow hides tanned in oak bark and softened in butter. I decided my creation would be an open wooden canoe designed for flat-water journeys, light for easy portage but strong and stable on the water, with enough capacity to carry camping gear and supplies for several days at a time. Best of all, according to the canoe designer's guidelines, "all that is required are a few common tools and the most basic woodworking skills". With minimal woodworking skills, this was encouraging.

The foundations of my vessel's hull were hewn from four sheets of okoume plywood. Drawing out the shape of each plank was a painstakingly slow process. I spent several days measuring, remeasuring and then triple-checking the dimensions before summoning up the courage to take up the hand saw. The saw bit through the rose-pink wood with surprising ease, releasing a pleasantly sweet and earthy smell. Within a few hours, the task was complete. When laid out flat on the workshop floor, the roughly hewn planks formed the ghostly outline of a canoe, and I felt a stirring of anticipation. As each task progressed, the urge to work on the project grew stronger, and I found myself spending more and more time in the workshop. What had started out as an occasional few hours here and there became days and then whole weekends.



After four months' labour, my canoe was ready to be moved from the confines of the workshop to the great outdoors, where it could at last come to life. I let my gaze trace her slender shape and graceful lines: the soft curve of her gunnels sweeping gently from bow to stern; the flare of her rounded hull yielding sharply to upturned stems; the delicate cream of her narrow lapped planks, their paleness a stark contrast to the rich russet brown of her interior.

Despite the many blood-soaked sacrifices, the satisfaction of creating a boat entirely by my own hands was immense. I called her Minnow.

Bringing such a vessel to life opened up worlds of possibility. It was early summer when I launched Minnow from the shores of Lough Erne in Northern Ireland, the start of my voyage. Heading south, I navigated a passage along the River Shannon, across the midlands by the Grand Canal and down the River Barrow to the tidal waters at St Mullins on the border of Carlow and Kilkenny. Paddling for the most part alone, I undertook the journey in stages and over the course of several months. The canoe was the one constant throughout, carrying me with grace and stamina across lakes, down rivers, along canals and up shallow rills.

Growing up, I consumed countless books about the sea and the many great explorers. The heroes of these tales were almost always men – fit, fearless and macho. Heroines were thin on the ground, an oversight I often bemoaned and promised to resolve if the opportunity ever arose. That chance presented itself when I began researching and writing about my own kayaking adventure. Delving beneath the surface, I uncovered a cast of inspiring characters, mostly women, whose paths happened to intersect with mine. Paddling along the Grand Canal, I learned about Mary Ward, the pioneering astronomer, microscopist and artist.

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A woman with a curious mind, who was absorbed by the world of tiny plants and creatures that resided in the bog close to her home in Ferbane. Descending the River Barrow, I came across the photographic work of Jane W Shackleton, who travelled the length and breadth of Ireland by boat in the late 1800s, documenting life along the waterways with a heavy wooden camera and glass plate negatives. Browsing through her black and white prints, I was struck by how recognisable the waterways remain; the locks, bridges and quays look the same today as they did for Jane. At a low point in my voyage along the Barrow Line Canal, I found inspiration and light relief in Maura Laverty's work. The Rathangan-born author, playwright and celebrity chef had a quick and playful wit. Their stories, along with many others – historical, mythological and contemporary, are woven through the narrative of my book, *The Waters and the Wild*.

For these women, travelling alone would have been frowned upon and expedition travel regarded as far too physically demanding for women and lacking creature comforts. Happily, much has changed today but I still found

wild camping a fine balance between solitude and safety. Fumbling with tent pegs and guy ropes in unfamiliar terrain, I was jumpy and wary, constantly looking over my shoulder or straining to make out a sound. The dull routine of housebound life was kicked aside and dormant senses triggered. My solo travel was stressful, yes, but also enlivening, exhilarating.

Of course, I was never truly alone. Wildlife was ever present, whether it was drifting on lakes in the company of restless lapwings, spellbound by lively otters or playing chase-and-flee with elusive kingfishers.

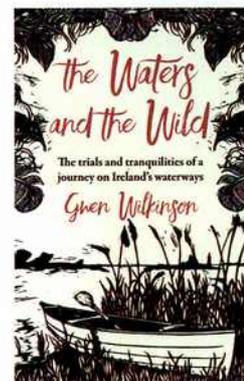


For me, the creatures that lived above and beneath the water became a subject of endless fascination. The silent passage of the canoe enabled close encounters with a multitude of feathered friends – curlew, egret, grebe, merganser, and, of course, the ubiquitous heron. Returning home to my studio, I couldn't wait to render these intimate encounters – lino and woodcut prints became my medium of choice.

Like all good voyage tales, mine took me to deserted islands and wondrous shores. Along the way I encountered realms once inhabited by Celtic deities, mythical monsters and supernatural beings. Fuelled by curiosity, I sought out and touched the grizzled surface of Boa Island's enigmatic stone carved figures, and experienced a strange and savage wilderness on Lough Bofin's Rabbit Island. I delighted in the seductive smile of the Clonfert mermaid and was seduced to follow Queen Maeve's lead, wild swimming in Lough Ree.

At the tidal waters of the River Barrow, Minnow, my beautiful canoe, had reached journey's end. But the lure of adventure bore away downstream and I could not resist its pull.

Ambitious plans are taking shape that will take me out to sea – a circumnavigation of Ireland's coast with Curlew, a small wooden sailboat. I want to travel along the ancient sea roads that follow the country's shoreline, explore Atlantic islands, dip in and out of coves. The quest for adventure is a mysterious desire, once caught in its web resistance is futile.



ABOVE Gwen's book about her journey, *The Waters and the Wild*, is available now. FROM FAR LEFT A corncrake and an egret, inspired by the birds Gwen encountered on her voyage.