

SOLO ROUND IRELAND

Unlike many other trips, mine did not originate in a pub late on Saturday night. It came about because I wanted to paddle alone; sea canoeing provided the answer. Easter was spent gathering information and writing sponsorship letters. As my Finals approached, things became increasingly hectic with my boat to fit out, charts to waterproof and food to pack. 15th July arrived after a final two weeks at home. This was meant for training but I got bored and sea-sick on my first day so I gave it up as a bad job.

I left my car at the Anglesey School of Sea Canoeing and crossed on the ferry, a big lump in my throat. This soon receded as I skipped customs and got on the water just 20 yards from the ferry. I put in 18 miles that afternoon and dossed in a deserted house. After goulash and rice I called at a house for water. There I told my rather limited story over numerous cups of tea and was invited to breakfast in the morning. During the night plaster fell off the ceiling as the trains went past. After breakfast I pushed on to Wicklow Head and my first tide-race. I camped south of Arklow. Next morning I launched into the face of a thunder storm. An hour and a half later I retired to the safety of a cave as the storm reverberated around me. I had been there 20 minutes when the cliffs shook as a derelict barge, 200 yards along the beach, was struck. That evening I reached Rosslare and the following day rounded Carnsore point where I turned west.

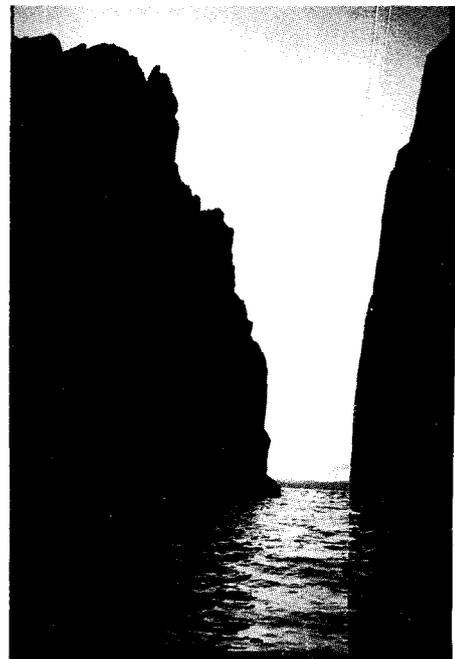
I pulled in at the village of Fethard on the Hook peninsula at 5.30; by 6.00 I was enjoying the luxury of a shower in the local VEC outdoor pursuits centre. Chilli con carne provided a break from dried food and the company of others was a change from my own. I was sad to leave after a day in their company; however, calm conditions meant I was able to do 35, 28 and 26 miles on consecutive days. I reached Kinsale at lunchtime on 22nd July after crossing Cork Harbour in 10 foot waves, the largest to date. Once more, the VEC centre was my home for a day as I had got in touch from Fethard. From there I paddled through the Old Head of Kinsale in a tunnel 150 yards long and 10 feet wide. Trying to get a 17 foot kayak weighing 200 lbs through a kink in a tunnel that narrowed to 5 feet is one of the most vivid memories of the trip. I reached Rosscarbery that evening and, the day after, Cape Clear Island. Mr and Mrs O'Loideoin have put up most of the people paddling

round Ireland in the hostel. However, their welcome was no less warm for that. Next day I crossed to Mizen Head and from there across Dunmanus and Bantry Bays. I bounced through the race in Dursey Sound in the morning of 27th but there the fun ended as a force 5 sprang up in my face across the Kenmare River, with the wind against tide and every wave breaking over the bow, along the deck and into my face; it took me 4½ hours to do just 7 miles. Sitting in the lee of Deenish Island I discovered that my Bourbon biscuits had disintegrated in my pocket, which was the last straw. I arrived at Ballinskelligs tired and very demoralised. After a day off I felt better and moved on to Valencia Island where I camped below the lighthouse. I was entertained by Jeremy Uniacke that evening and sampled my first poteen (locally brewed potato whisky). Feeling none the worse for it, I crossed to Great Blasket Island. The island was abandoned in the 1950s but is becoming increasingly popular as a tourist spot. There I met Tom Daley who paddled round in 1979. It felt strange to sit on the cliffs with America 'just over the water' to the west.

The following morning I packed in the rain and paddled the 22 miles to Brandon. Warnings of a force 7 kept me in my pit till 10am when I hitched into Baile Na nGall where I met the father of one of the Fethard VEC instructors. He, in turn, introduced me to Ger, a local fisherman who rowed a curragh round in 1977. 2nd August also saw me stormbound but I made up for this next day, doing 41 miles across the mouth of the Shannon to Kilkee. That evening a cow walked into my tent, breaking a pole and tearing

it. I made repairs but the pole broke repeatedly after this, usually when it was raining. Looking for water, I knocked on Joe McMahon's door. He invited me in and then got his brother-in-law, Sean, to listen to my story. Both were very concerned about my safety and offered to transport me 3 miles up the coast to a better launching place. I refused, explaining the need for a complete circumnavigation. Joe saw me off the next morning and I reached Inishmore, the largest of the Aran islands, by 4pm. This was disappointing as the islanders have no idea about waste disposal and tourism is rearing its ugly head.

I was not sorry to leave and reached Ballyconeely, my half-way point, after



Andy Fleck



Andy Fleck

Top: Stack off Dursey Island.

Bottom: Rathlin O'Birne lighthouse, half way round.

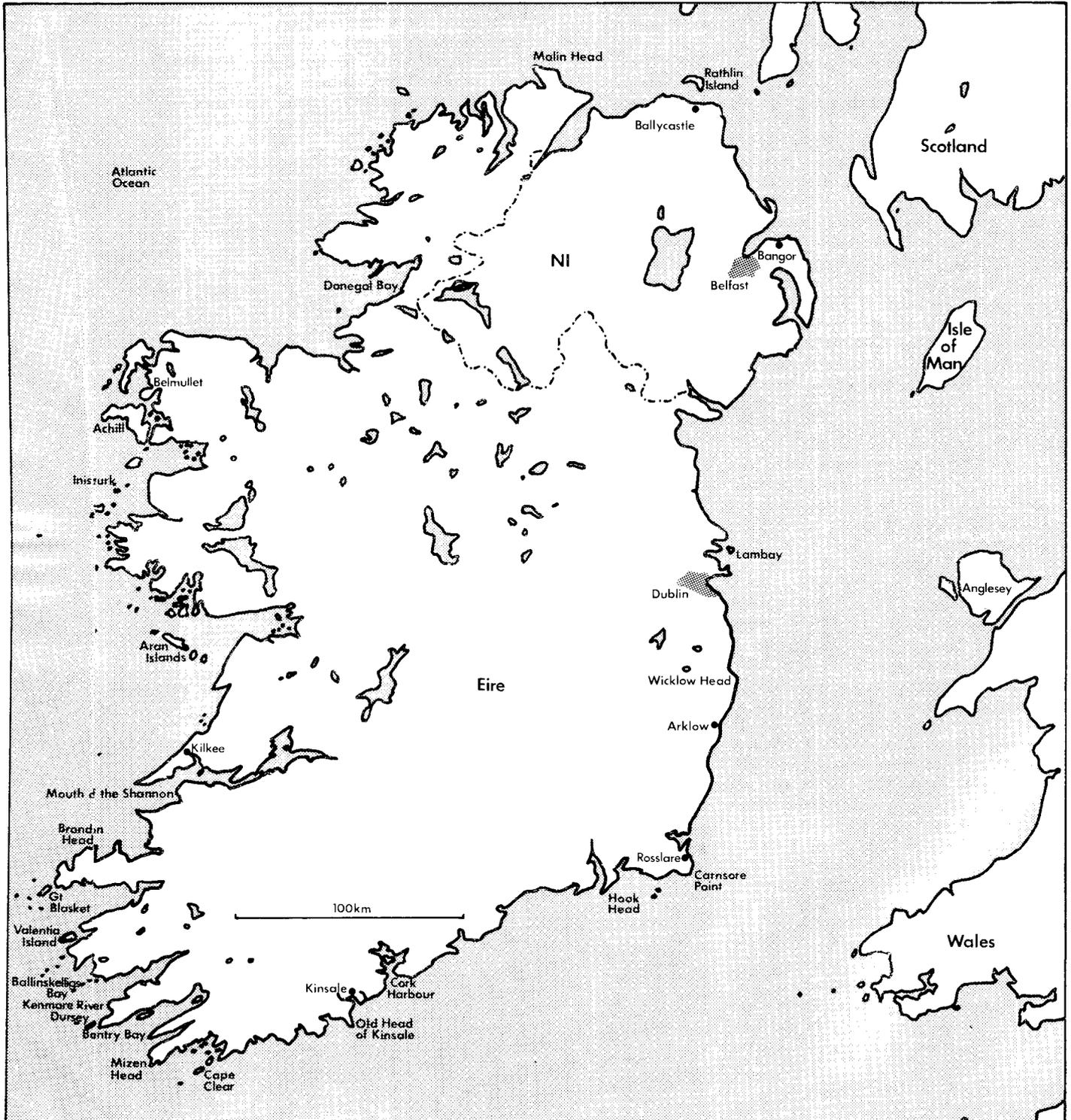


Andy Fieck

paddling through shoals of jellyfish. Once more, Irish hospitality was evident and Patrick Duane invited me in for tea and cakes. Again I told my story and promised to send him a postcard when I finished. On this, as on many other occasions, I felt frustrated that this was all I could do to repay such hospitality. Later I was invaded by ants.

Inish-turk was my next stop. With its gold beach, clear water and tiny harbour, it had a distinctly Mediterranean flavour. I stripped off and had my first wash in two weeks, wonderful! Two days later I passed round the 800 foot cliffs off Achill Head. They towered over me, rising out of the fog and

Camp at Inish-turk.



contrasting strongly with the low, barren Belmullet Peninsula.

I had a rest day at the village of Belderig where Seamus and Ann Caulfield invited me in for a cup of tea. I ended up staying for a day, most of which was spent eating. The whole family saw me off at 6.00am on the morning of 11th August. I paddled past the sea stack Dun Briste which was inhabited until the arch broke in the 13th century. I camped at Pollnativa and set off for Teelin, across Donegal Bay, in thick fog in the morning. Slieve League looked very close from 15 miles away but took an eternity to reach. However, paddling under it in the morning, the 2,300 foot cliffs were spectacular, to say the least.

For the next two days I had following winds enabling me to clock up 72 miles with ease. I paddled round Malin Head in 20 foot waves. My landing at Culdaff caused a stir of excitement when I explained where I had come from; the fishermen had not been out in the bay that day.

From then on it was a question of finishing the trip off. I put in 11½ hours to do the 40 miles to Ballycastle in Northern Ireland. Past Rathlin Island I went with 4 knots of tide under me and on down the east coast. The tides run north for 9 out of 12 hours on this stretch so I was rock hopping for the next two days. Just north of Bangor I bounced off a rock damaging the front compartment, a fine 21st birthday present! To cap that, my catalyst had leaked but Bangor Shipyard gave me some more. After a day of repairs I was back on the road and pushing on down the east coast into the wind and surrounded by fog. Frustration mounted to the point of screaming at the wind as boredom set in. After the spectacular west coast, the east was a real anticlimax. Three days after leaving Bangor I reached Rush, my last stopping place. Despite the frustrations of the last few days I was sad to unpack my tent for the last time. I camped with the flysheet pegged over the edge of a cliff and had just finished the last of my dried

food when I was invited in by Nanny Gray. She gave me tea and rashers, serving as a reminder of the wonderful hospitality which had been such a bonus throughout the trip.

The last morning dawned fine and calm and I made good time past Lambay Island and Ireland's Eye. Three dolphins circled round the boat and a solitary seal brought back memories of the west coast.

I arrived back at the Royal St George Yacht Club 40 days after leaving the customs steps there. I landed by myself and was able to reflect for a moment on the past month and a half, some of it bad, a lot of it good, all of it memorable.

Finally, my thanks to Damart, Dartmouth Sportswear, Davie Mason and Insulatawear for the clothing, Cags & Bags and Whitewater Sports for waterproofs, Lendal for the paddles and Sestral for my compass. Without their support the trip would have been both uncomfortable and impractical. Andy Fleck

The Australian Surfer's Code

1

DONT DROP IN

The surfer closest to the breaking part of the wave has the right of way. Always check your inside. To say you didnt see anyone is inexcusable. This practice is highly dangerous on critical waves!

4

DONT PADDLE OUT THROUGH THE BREAK

Go around, its safer and wont spoil someones ride!

2

DONT HOG WAVES

With your greater paddling power, your gang to get far more waves than the surfer. Learn to share the waves and give a few. You will get much more respect that way, than by ripping every wave that comes your way!

5

BE POLITE

Trading insults and derogatory remarks only create unnecessary incidents. Keep your cool and be nice.

3

DONT ENDANGER OTHERS

UNCONTROLLED MANOEUVRES IMPRESS NO-ONE. 360's are dangerous in crowded situations. Use a fin at all times, as well as a paddle leash and/or seat belt.

6

SHARE THE SEA

If you want to lose the tag "Boatman" you'll have to play the game according to surfers rules. They were there first, so learn to give more than you get. Organised competitions will allow your ability to grow and you'll learn to share the waves. Join your local club.