

VALKYRIE CRAFTS

photos by Rob Durston

John and Hamish Wilkinson, first and foremost practising canoeists, are also artisans in wooden Canadian canoes and kayaks. They work to build boats that last for more than a hundred years, look graceful in the water and paddle beautifully.



The Wilkinson's workshop sits on the hills above Castlerock on the North Coast, on a clear day opening out to a view across to the shores of Isla and Jura of Scotland. From here you can start to understand the bygone days of the old Kingdom of Dál Riada that spanned Western Scotland and North East Ulster. From a view like this you could be forgiven to think it's almost swimming distance between the two lands.

Step into the workshop and the smell of freshly planed cedar and pine lift your spirits almost immediately, evoking images of vast Canadian forests and a time when native Canadian canoes were paddled and maintained for hundreds of years. And they still can be. A wooden Canadian canoe or sea kayak, if properly built and cared for, can last for more than a hundred years. John Wilkinson and his son Hamish build such wooden works of art, keeping alive the traditional art of boat building.

They are first and foremost practising canoeists, so they know how they want their boats to feel in the water. Their starting point for any boat is to measure your body height and length of your limbs. The boat is built for you. Started as a hobby, by 2005 Valkyrie was in existence and John was focusing on cedar and canvas boats close in design to the American Indian birch bark canoe. They take between one and three months to make by hand, with steam bent frames and hand planed paddles.

Their name 'Valkyrie' pays homage to the Norwegian influence in the 'dronheim' design, the traditional fishing boats found all along the north of Ireland. In Norwegian mythology Valkyries exist as beautiful swans, except in times of battle, when they take the slain heroes off the battle field and carry them to heaven. Valkyries, the Norwegian angels of death.

Hamish has been joining his dad for years in the workshop after school, and since finishing sixth year has joined John full time. Last summer he became resolute in his ambition

to circumnavigate the island of Ireland. He built his own sea kayak for the trip, in an old gracefully streamlined West Greenland style. There's a different kayak for every type of water, but the Greenland kayak is one of the best designs in the world if you want to spend time at sea: it has evolved over thousands of years, is flatter, narrower and faster than a lot of its counterparts, and fares better in high winds. They modified it to carry all the kit and food needed, and Hamish set off clockwise around the country in late summer 2014.

The four main corners of Ireland - Torr Head, Carnsore point, Mizen and Malin Head - were the real marking points of the journey. And his kayak did him proud. Because there are no screws in the design, the whole piece was held together by the structure and makes the whole thing quite flexible. It "kinda felt like it was alive, more like a living companion than a piece of equipment". It shifted and bent with the waves like no piece of plastic could. Which came in handy when he once dropped it on the beach and it bounced instead of broke. Hamish named it 'Selkie', a creature that comes up in stories and old songs throughout Ireland, Scotland and North America. They are said to live as seals at sea, but shed their skin to become human on land. Some reckon if traced carefully, most Selkies are based on Inuit hunters going off course and coming ashore along these coastlines. Hamish didn't encounter any on this particular adventure, but instead arrived home, windswept and wiser, 70 days later to become the youngest person to paddle solo around Ireland.

When asked if there was one thing they would like everyone to know about boats, they were in clear agreement. Traditional systems and materials are just as viable as our modern plastic ways of living, and in many cases better. The knowledge systems and practices are living and flexible, just like the wooden kayak moves and shifts with the water beneath you. ●

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