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Ken Taylor's Kayak The Origins of Modern Greenland-Style Kayaks

Feature – December 2008

Ken Taylor's Kayak The Origins of Modern Greenland-Style Kayaks
By *Duncan R. Winning*

Inuit kayaks have been around for millennia, but the story of one particular kayak built by Emmanuelle Korniliussen of Greenland starts in 1937 when Harald Drever, a young geologist from Edinburgh, Scotland, visited Ubekendt Ejland (Unknown Island). Ubekendt is located in Umanak Fjord on the west coast of Greenland more than 300 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Harald was attracted to the island by its unique geology, but he was much more than a visiting academic. During his near 40-year association with the island he did much to assist the community and established a close relationship with the villagers in Igdlorssuit. He learned kayaking skills from them, including rolling, and had his own kayak. He also put up a trophy for an annual kayak race for Greenlanders from Igdlorssuit to Uummanaq, an open sea crossing of some 50 miles. When he left Greenland he took his kayak to Scotland, where it was used to train others in skills he had learned.

Harald later became a professor at St. Andrews University in Scotland. In 1955 he met Kenneth Taylor, a kayaker and a student at Glasgow University, and persuaded him to combine his studies with his paddling interests and go to Igdlorssuit to investigate the Greenland kayak and its place in Inuit culture. (Ken and I were members of the Scottish Hostellers' Canoe Club. The club had its origins in the late 1930s and after World War II was probably the only club in Britain to specialize in sea paddling. Club members developed their own design of sea kayak, compiled standards for flotation, life jackets and more, years before others in the UK.)



So, in 1959 Ken spent three months at Igdlorssuit. Very few paddlers in Scotland could roll, but Ken had spent a lot of time the previous winter in an unheated pool learning the skill and this aided in the villagers' acceptance of him. He paddled with the seal-catchers, learning a great deal about their kayaks, hunting equipment and methods in the process. Interestingly, although he was allowed to use his Scottish touring kayak on the hunts, he had to keep well to the rear because of the noise made by his European-style paddles. The seal-catchers loved to borrow his paddles and go for high-speed sprints, but not when there were seals about! While Ken was in Igdlorssuit, Emmanuelle Korniliussen—the last kayak builder in the village—built him a sealskin-covered kayak, complete with hunting equipment. Ken was to have another kayak built for the respected American kayak enthusiast John D.

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Heath. However, there was insufficient sealskin for both kayaks. John had to make do with a frame. (Following John's death the frame has been in the care of Greg Stamer of QAJAQ USA. John visited Greenland on a number of occasions and was revered by the Greenlanders, who called him "Grandfather." I had the honor of calling John a friend for more than 40 years.)

In the spring of 1960, following his return to Scotland, Ken gave a demonstration of rolling his Greenland kayak and harpoon throwing to the Hostellers. Those of us in the club who could squeeze into his kayak got to paddle it. I was one of the lucky ones, although donning the wet, smelly, sealskin tuilik, or paddling jacket, was not so enchanting.

I had been designing and building my own kayaks for seven years, and while I was well pleased with the performance of my latest design, I was very impressed with the handling of Ken's boat. I should not have been surprised that my experimenting with kayak design would compare rather poorly against the thousands of years of development that had gone into the kayak from Igdlorssuit. My experience with Ken's kayak when I was 20 years of age led to a lifelong interest in Inuit kayaks, especially those from Greenland. My first rudimentary lines drawing of the Igdlorssuit kayak became the first plan in the "Project Eskimo" series established in 1961 in conjunction with the British magazine Canoeing.

I had been active in the Scottish paddling scene since my teens and was closely involved in setting up the Scottish Canoe Association Coaching Scheme, which subsequently joined with that of the British Canoe Union. Through this connection I met a young Gordon Brown, now one of the leading sea paddling coaches in the UK. For quite some time we have shared an interest in Greenland kayaking; he made his first Greenland-style paddle 17 years ago. In 2003 Gordon suggested that the logical extension to my interest in Inuit kayaks would be to visit Greenland. I had never seriously considered such a trip as it was beyond my financial circumstances. However, at his suggestion I applied to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, which provides some 100 traveling fellowships annually, and was fortunate to be awarded one of only two fellowships in a canoeing-related field for 2004.

So in July of 2004 I set off to Greenland on a four-week project titled "The Inuit Origins of Modern Recreational Sea Kayaks." It was to be a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Ken's kayak and an investigation into design changes in Greenland kayaks and paddles since their creation. Gordon accompanied me on the first phase of the project, paddling from Uummanaq to Igdlorssuit and back. An overnight stop scheduled between flights at Ilulissat turned into a three-day layover and we finally arrived in Uummanaq at Saturday lunchtime. Our kayaks had been shipped out in advance, but the warehouse was closed for the day. However, the helpful man at the heliport phoned the manager to come and open up for us. My boat had been damaged in several places and we spent the rest of the afternoon repairing it and sorting gear.

The following noon the fog lifted sufficiently and allowed us to see Storøen (Sagdliauseq), an island four miles east of Uummanaq, and confirm a compass heading. We were off, paddling among Greenland ice for the first time. We passed hundreds of bergs on our way to the small island of Saattut where we camped at the site of an old settlement. From camp we walked west to the village, which appeared to be expanding with new houses and a very smart school that was decorated with large images of whales, sea birds and seals. Less endearing was the inescapable and constant noise emanating from the multitude of roaming sled dogs. We examined four kayaks in the village before we returned to our campsite and quiet.

Fog was hanging in the morning air as we set off island-hopping to Agpat where we skirted the southern coast before crossing to Sagleq some two miles to the west. At the northern end of the island the fog was dense but by then we had taken sufficient bearings to confirm the magnetic variation, which was over 40 degrees west. We set off into the gloom for Qeqertat, an abandoned settlement on a relatively small island about 1.5 miles distant. Nearing our destination we encountered a large number of sled dogs on a rocky islet. From their demeanor they obviously expected a bearer of food to disembark from any approaching craft. Unable to oblige, we stayed resolutely in our kayaks. Soon after landing at Qeqertat we were safely nestled into our sleeping bags.



ARTICLE ARCHIVE

Paddling to Independence

Feature – February 2013 Paddling to Independence By Mary Kurt-Mason The wind hit our camp at 3 a.m., blasting me out of a deep sleep, and by dawn, my worst[...]

SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube social media feeds for Sea Kayaker Magazine.

Twitter: Tweets from @SeaKayakermag. Includes tweets about "Whitewater in London, a Thanksgiving paddle and a 5 Star Sea Assessment" and "Sea Kayaker back issues are now on sale!".

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In the morning the fog had gone and we could see the dramatic cliffs we had paddled under yesterday, unaware of what had towered unseen more than 3,000 feet above us. Around our camp we found the remains of old round and square style winter houses, traditional graves marked by stone cairns and a small cemetery on the hill containing 60 to 100 graves, many of them children's.

Sunshine accompanied us on the crossing to a lunch stop on the end of Alfred Wegener Peninsula. As we progressed westward across Kangerdluarssuk Fjord, conditions deteriorated, so we landed near its mouth to await an improvement. We lit a fire to warm our toes, but our wait was in vain and the temporary respite became an overnight camp on the shingle.

Next morning, improved conditions merited an early rise and we were on the water before 7 A.M. A following wind pushed us to the corner of Upernivik and into Igdlorssuit Sound. The nine-mile crossing to Ubekendt Ejland started in good conditions, but by the time our bows touched the shore it was blowing Force 6 from the southwest and it was raining. After 33 miles paddling that day we were glad to be ashore, all the more so as we were now within yards of where Emmanuelle Korniliussen built Ken Taylor's kayak 45 years earlier. It was fitting that the fiberglass kayaks that carried us were the latest in a long line of modern sea kayaks to be based on that particular craft.

The assembled group who had watched us arrive acknowledged our "Hallo" with a smile and an echoing "Allo." Our common vocabulary ended there. Elizabeth Fleischer, a newly arrived teacher at the village school and the only person on the island who could speak English, arranged for us to hire the small village hall for our stay. This was luxury for us with central heating and a fully equipped kitchen. Elizabeth said that there was no hunting by kayak now and that recreational paddling had been severely affected by low morale in the village brought on by an accident in the spring of the previous year when a snowmobile towing a boat broke through the sea ice and four lives were lost. We visited the cemetery and were taken aback by the sight of brightly colored flowers still in place since the interment of the four, some 16 months previously. It soon dawned on us that the flowers were plastic.

We gave Elizabeth a leaflet I had prepared about Ken's visit and his connection to Harald Drever. She promised to ask around and see if anyone in the village remembered the two men. Later she asked us about Harald Drever as her school was named Harald's School in his honor. She led us to her office where a photograph of an oilskin-clad figure and a shield hung above the door. It was Harald Drever and the shield of St. Andrews University.

Elizabeth learned that several descendants of Emmanuelle lived on the island: two sons, two grandsons and several great grandchildren. She arranged visits to the homes of a son, Hendrik (Inderinnuaq) Korniliussen and a grandson, Edward (Ilvarti). Emmanuelle had been the last kayak builder on the island. The only kayak built since his death was a child's kayak made in 2002 by the other son Jurgen (Juulut). Grandson Edward builds excellent model kayaks, sleds and harpoon sets, all of which we carefully examined along with his collection of harpoon heads. The model kayaks have the gunwale boards raised in the way of the masik (the deck beam supporting the forward end of the cockpit) as do most of the full-sized kayaks seen in the village, a feature not seen elsewhere. Edward's house is built on the spot where Ken Taylor camped in 1959, and Edward has a kayak in the basement which he bought secondhand but has never paddled. In the evening Edward appeared at our "lodging" and without a common language save pencil and paper. By sketching, we had two hours of "conversation" and found out many things about his life, including that his outboard motor had suffered a broken driveshaft and that we were invited to join him at his house for coffee the following morning.

Edward showed us his 19-foot fiberglass fishing boat, fishing gear, workshop and the kayak in the basement. The rest of the afternoon was spent exploring the village and examining the nine other kayaks found there. One was the last built by Emmanuelle and had lain on its rack ever since its owner, a seal-catcher, had died. All were in varying stages of decay except one belonging to a man from Niaqornat on the south side of Umanak Fjord. It was a fine example, complete with hunting gear.

Early the following morning we rose and were quickly on the water. The return crossing of the Sund was unhurried on a calm sea in pleasant morning sunshine. The wind rose strongly toward the end of the day's paddle and we landed at almost the same spot we had camped at four days earlier, on the west side of Kangerdluarssuk Fjord. No shingle bed this time, but a bit of greenery just vacated by an arctic fox that was not inclined to share it with us. After a good meal we sat at the fire before turning in at about 11 P.M.

As the morning showed no improvement, a long rest made up for the previous day's exertion. A wrecked sledge provided fuel for a pleasant evening fire, enjoyed all the more for the view of glaciers and mountains rising over 6,000 feet from the opposite side of the fjord some four miles away.

The following morning brought calm seas and we resumed our journey, arriving by mid afternoon at Uvkusigssat. It was a busy place with a fish processing plant and seemed to be expanding with a high percentage of new houses. We examined five kayaks, none of which appeared to be in use. One extreme example was nearly 23 feet long and featured an unusually extended, deep and narrow bow. We made camp at the old abandoned settlement of Akuliaruseq, with the usual cheering fire to accompany the late evening coffee.

Near the Silardleq Glacier we noticed the words "1966 Tobias Jensen" scraped in the lichen on the rock surface. It brought home to us just how fragile the environment is in these northern latitudes, that the lichen scraped off the rock 38 years before had not yet grown back. The last six miles back to Uummanaq were on calm seas but with much more ice about. The harbor was almost completely choked with smaller chunks, the larger bergs having grounded farther out. At Uummanaq we packed the kayaks for shipment home, Gordon headed back to Copenhagen and I flew to Sisimiut to continue my research. Most of my three-day sojourn there was spent at the kayak club watching Maligiag Padilla, the young Greenland kayaking champion, building a kayak. It was the 29th he had built and his ninth that year. At the museum were the remains of a very old kayak from about 1650 to 1700. One gunwale was scarfed and the very thin deck beams had not been tenoned through the gunwales but had sat in blind holes. The paddle was very short and slender, the shaft being longer in relation to the blades than any other I had seen in Greenland. Another, less ancient kayak of the Avasisaartoq type with a sharply upturned stern was minus its cockpit and all the ribs had collapsed. Outside the museum was a modern kayak, different from the local types but similar to ones seen later at Nuuk. Maligiag said that John Petersen, a previous kayak champion, had built it.

My next stop was in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. At the National Museum I was pleased to see the Pearyland Umiak had been returned from Copenhagen where it was taken for reconstruction after being found in 1949 and sawn into bits for transport. It is estimated to be nearly 600 years old!

In addition to the kayaks we saw in Greenland's museums, we viewed nearly 80 kayaks in Greenland. Most were canvas-covered, some only in frame and a very few skin-covered. The newer ones usually were associated with kayak clubs. The older ones that had once been used for hunting were mostly in a bad state, abandoned on kayak stands and left to rot. Some were still in use for recreational paddling, but many of the deck fittings used for hunting were missing.

As in most cultures, readily available materials in Greenland had found their way into traditional crafts. Plastic strips are often used now for kayak ribs. This, I believe, has led to a change in the cross section of some craft, as the plastic tends to take up a semicircular shape, compared with the traditional wooden ribs, which could be set to a flatter profile. This could explain why many of the kayaks we saw that had plastic ribs had a deeper V to the bottom than recorded in older examples. Canvas is now more easily obtained than sealskin and is the most common covering.

Throughout the trip, local variations in the basic kayak shape were evident. For instance, the kayaks being built by Maligiag in Sisimiut have more symmetry in profile than those being built in Nuuk. In both places the use of imported timber, such as ash and oak, has led to heavier ribs placed farther apart, compared to the more numerous slender split sapling ribs of the older examples. In two of the modern kayaks examined, an additional stringer had been added between the keel and the chine, giving greater support to the covering and a more rounded cross-section. One of these had much shorter overhangs at the ends, giving a longer waterline for the overall length and in turn faster calm water speed, all other things being equal.

Generally, the newer kayaks had longer waterlines, reduced rocker and a deeper cross section than the old hunting craft, making them less maneuverable but more suitable for racing at the national championships. Another type of kayak has evolved from the traditional hunting kayak. It is shorter with a very low freeboard, made for ease of rolling in competition. To retain traditional values, all kayaks used by Greenlanders in the championships must be skin (or canvas) on frame, contain no metal fastenings, be fitted with deck straps and be propelled by narrow-bladed Greenland paddles.

The Importance of Ken's Kayak

When Ken brought his kayak to Scotland, no commercial designs were available in the UK for sea-touring kayaks. Most paddlers made do with general-purpose boats while a small number built their own. So I took photographs and used these as the basis for the hull shape of my next touring kayak and for a double version, the need for which arose from other youthful desires in the shape of a young lady of close acquaintance. Both of these designs proved popular within the Scottish sea-paddling scene and were adopted by the plans service of Canoeing magazine. Examples were built worldwide

and some are still in use today.

In 1964 Ken moved to the United States and left his kayak in the care of my paddling buddy, the late Joe Reid, and myself. We carefully measured it and I produced a drawing, which [See drawing on p. 50] has given rise to a large number of semi-replicas, designs for do-it-yourself builders, at least four commercial Greenland-style hard-chined kayaks and a number of round bilge designs, all with a connection to the Igdlorssuit kayak. Such designs, from various parts of the world, now total nearly 50! The Anas Acuta is one of the better-known offspring. In the 1960s, English paddler Geoffrey Blackford could not find a suitable commercial sea kayak, nor a design to build one, so I gave him a copy of my drawing of Ken's kayak. He lengthened the kayak by 9.75 inches, altered the ends to suit plywood construction and fitted a deck and cockpit to accommodate a larger paddler. The Anas Acuta was an instant success and Carel Quaife, one-time British Canoe Union development officer, produced a mold for a fiberglass version. Alan Byde, a popular kayak designer, coach and author, later refined the mold. Frank Goodman of Valley Canoe Products took up commercial production of the Anas under license from Blackford, Quaife and Byde.

A large number of Inuit kayaks, mostly from Greenland, have been brought to Britain over many years, but none have had the impact on the design of modern recreational sea kayaks that Ken Taylor's has. Only his has spawned abundant derivatives and continues to do so. A very few who paddle such kayaks have heard of Ken Taylor and his kayak, but hardly any know of Emmanuelle Korniliussen from the village of Igdlorssuit. I think he finally deserves to be recognized.

Duncan R. Winning, O.B.E., is the honorary president of both the Scottish Canoe Association and the Historic Canoe and Kayak Association. He started kayaking at age 10 and has designed and built his own sea kayaks since 1953.

The author will provide a 23x16-inch copy of his lines drawing of the Korniliussen/Taylor kayak to interested readers. You may contact Duncan via e-mail at duncan.winning@btconnect.com. He currently charges \$5 US to cover the costs of copying and mailing.

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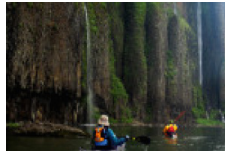
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