

Rowing around the Island

Nancy J. Turner

Rowboats have always been my favourite way of travelling on water. There is something special about the rhythm and regular surge that propels you forward. Rowing is the nautical equivalent to “Slow Food.” When I was a kid, I spent many happy hours with my sister and our friend Joan, sporting our bulky lifejackets, rowing in a bulky clinker-built rowboat along the shores of Lake Cowichan.

Over the years, what with going to university, raising children, teaching and the entire maelstrom of activities that capture our lives, I was swept away in other directions, deprived of rowboats and their pleasures. For a brief period we owned a beautiful but aged carvel-built rowboat named *Tsuki* – the Japanese name for “Moon.” *Tsuki* was built by a Japanese Canadian boatwright interned in the Interior during World War II. He built the boat in Nelson, in southeastern British Columbia, and it had been used on Kootenay Lake ever since. Ownership had fallen to one of our friends, and unable to look after her, he gave her to us. We bought a boat trailer and brought *Tsuki* back to Victoria, intending to patch up her cracks (which had been sealed with black tar) and launch her on the coast. But she had been neglected too long, and the shaped planks had started to rot at the bow. In the end we returned her to her birthplace in the Kootenays, to live out her days at the Nelson Museum.

Decades and decades later, my husband Bob and I bought our place on Protection Island, off Nanaimo, and almost immediately our daughters ordered a small rowboat for me. This boat, which we called “*Nancy’s Calypso*,” is in a class called “Lady Slipper,” designed and built by master boatbuilder John Rabenek of Nanaimo. *Calypso* sits on a small boat trailer that we can easily pull behind our small electric golfcart down to a boat launch at the south end of the island. When I climb in and push off, I enter my own world. It’s hard to describe; it’s challenging, exhilarating, comforting and relaxing, all at the same time.

Invariably I spot harbour seals lounging on the log booms I row past on the west side of Protection Island. They slip easily into the water and follow my boat, poking their sleek heads out so I can admire and greet them, then sinking effortlessly and soundlessly beneath the waves, only to appear in some other location a short time later. Other creatures frequent the log booms and shoreline. I often see families of river otters galumphing along the logs, or raccoons scavenging along the beach. Great blue herons stand like statues, staring down into the water, patiently waiting for an unsuspecting fish to dart by. In early spring, when the herring congregate in large schools to spawn along the shoreline, huge flocks of gulls gather on the log booms, and swirl around overhead. Cormorants also perch on the booms at times, hanging their wings out to dry. Eagles, and sometimes turkey vultures, ride the air currents overhead, and kingfishers, with their sharp rattling calls, speed along the shore, stopping to hover at times then plunge into the water for the catch. We also have a flock of purple martins that arrive in the late spring and fill the summer air with their distinctive twittering from high up in the blue sky.

From the vantage point of my rowboat, I observe the world and all its activities. My island neighbours often motor by in their small boats, always with a cheerful greeting. Sometimes the Harbour patrol boat passes by, leaving a wake that gently rocks my boat. Always sailboats and yachts motor in and out of the harbour, and I imagine where they are heading – maybe to Alaska, maybe to Hawaii. Of course there are always kayakers, other rowers, and dragon boat crews working their paddles in sync, with the captain calling out the beat. I have to be careful that I don't bump into anyone, since I am facing backwards. Occasionally I bump into a small log but my relatively slow speed averts any damage. It's soothing; I easily find my own rhythm for the oars and fall into a meditative state of just being.

As I make my way around the island, I see special landmarks. There is the Dinghy Dock Pub, famous for its ambiance and camaraderie; people come from all over the world, taking the little foot ferry over from Nanaimo to experience this floating pub. I know it is a place of great value because once I saw a rainbow whose end hovered exactly ovetop of the Dinghy Dock. The little ferry, formerly a lifeboat from the big BC Ferries, takes island residents and Dinghy Dock customers back and forth every hour. I often see it coming and going as I row by. My little boat slips easily under the gangway connecting the dock with the island. Then come all the anchored boats dispersed around the west end of the channel between Protection and Newcastle islands. Some people live on their boats, and we get to know each other over time. More greetings, conversations about the weather, the seabirds and the events and issues of the day.

I greet my favourite boats as old friends: *Nanamuk*, *Kokomo*, *Seabreeze* and others. I notice if they are missing from their anchorages, and wonder where they have gone and how long they will be away. I look across to Newcastle and think about the history of this place. It doesn't take much imagination to put myself back in the days before the Europeans arrived here, to picture Snuneymuxw families spread all along the channel, pulling their cedar dugout canoes onto the beaches, camping under framework shelters covered with dense mats of cattail and tule, harvesting their food, preparing their fishnets and ducknets of stinging nettle fibre, and teaching their children the right way to do things: Always be respectful of other life, always be thankful for the gifts they provide, always share, and never waste. They would be speaking in their own Hul'q'umi'num language, which embodies terms for all of these things, as well as names for every cove, creek and point of land.

In the spring they would be digging clams, harvesting mussels and sea urchins, and pulling up masses of herring spawn-covered eelgrass. In summer they would be picking berries – red huckleberries, trailing blackberries, salal berries, thimbleberries – and harvesting camas bulbs along the coastal bluffs and cooking them in underground pits until they were as sweet as chestnuts. In fall, they would pick the little tart crabapples, and hunt swans, geese, ducks, seals, deer and other game. They used the islands as a base for fishing for salmon as well: springs in the early part of the year, sockeye and pinks in the summer, and coho and chum, or dog salmon, in the fall. I know of rock carvings made by the Old Ones in some locations on the Protection Island shoreline, powerful and beautiful images that symbolize interactions with the spirit world, although I have never seen them myself.

Rowing east through the channel between the islands at mid-tide I am treated to an amazing conglomeration of sealife – sand dollars, streams of emerald-green eelgrass, sea wrack and other marine algae, crater-like holes where butter clams, littlenecks and cockles are buried deep in the muddy sand, and masses of the more recently arrived Japanese oysters and manilla clams with their violet inner shells.

After the discovery of coal in and around these islands, the lives of the Snuneymuxw changed forever, as miners and settlers swarmed into their territory. Some people became wealthy, but the land suffered and so did many Snuneymuxw. Trees were cut down to make props for the coalmine tunnels and lumber for buildings. By the time the last coal mine in Nanaimo closed, the landscape had changed forever, although the forests have regenerated to some extent. Newcastle Island is now a protected marine park run by the Snuneymuxw People, and called “Saysutshun,” meaning “training for running” – one of the original activities that took place there long ago.

As I row alongside Saysutshun, I look for the profiles of my favourite big Douglas-fir trees on the island, and greet their familiar silhouettes. I see my favourite big cottonwoods along the shore, and giant big-leaf maples spread their mossy branches, providing shade for the visitors. Halfway along the channel is a small rocky peninsula projecting from Protection Island. It has a marker to warn boaters of the hazardous shallows. On occasion I have had to hop out and pull my boat through these narrows in the lowest tides. Frequently I see a covey of black oystercatchers, with their bright orange beaks and feet and their plaintiff calls, and a pair of red-tailed hawks circling. As well, the ever-present and charismatic ravens charm me with their raucous calls, which I like to imitate.

Once into deeper water I can look down to see the bottom alive with crabs of all sizes, scurrying about in some kind of mass choreographed underwater dance. I start to feel the swells of the outer channel surging into the gap and I have to work hard to progress through the big waves, but my little boat bobs over them without a single drop of water coming in. As soon as I have passed the big swells and get out into the main channel I easily ride the waves, getting propelled along with every wave twice as far as I could by rowing alone. This is the exhilarating part: rowboat surfing. I pass the houses of friends, including of our buddies Doug and Melissa. Melissa loves paddling her kayak as much as I love rowing and, whenever we can, we row and paddle together.

Seals keep following me and every once in awhile I see a shiny head popping up behind me, just to see what I’m about. In the fall and winter, we also have huge sea lions in the main channel. I call them the “bad boys.” They are the males of the southern California sea lions and the northern Steller’s sea lions, who come together in small groups to pursue the great salmon runs. They seem especially fond of the fall chum salmon, and their loud barking lasts long into the night. Sometimes, when I have to row quite close to them, they shoot almost out of the water nearby the boat, giving me a start. But they have never tried to hurt me or my boat in any way; I can only assume they are as curious about me as I am about them. They have bad

breath and their voices are loud and boisterous, but they add adventure and excitement to my journey.

Along the southern part of the island, I am sometimes overtaken by the Gabriola Island ferry, with its regular runs between Nanaimo and Gabriola. Of course I enjoy the waves created by the ferry, but have to be careful to orient my boat so it doesn't get swamped. Finally rounding the southern point, with the sad name, Gallows Point, I skirt around the small lighthouse, past the cove near where the coal mine on our island opened, around the public dock and back to the ramp, where Bob is waiting with the boat trailer to help me haul *Calypso* out of the water. By this time often the sun is just starting to go down and we are treated with peachy coloured skies to the west. If I'm lucky, I'll get to do it all again tomorrow.