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Coasting

A PRIVATE JOURNEY

JONATHAN RABAN



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Jonathan Raban is the author of *Soft City*, *Arabia*, *Foreign Land*, *Old Glory*, *For Love and Money*, *Hunting Mister Heartbreak*, *Bad Land*, and *Passage to Juneau*; he has also edited *The Oxford Book of the Sea*. Raban has received the National Book Critics Circle Award (for *Bad Land*), the Heinemann Award for Literature, the Thomas Cook Award, the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, the Governor's Award of the State of Washington, and the PEN West Creative Nonfiction Award, among others. Raban lives in Seattle, with his daughter.

ALSO BY JONATHAN RABAN

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God, Man, and Mrs. Thatcher

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To Caroline,

and another, shared, voyage

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There is in this aspect of land from the sea I know not what of continual discovery and adventure and therefore of youth, or, if you prefer a more mystical term, of resurrection. That which you thought you knew so well is quite transformed, and as you gaze you begin to think of the people inhabiting the firm earth beyond that line of sand as some unknown and happy people; or, if you remember their arrangements of wealth and poverty and their ambitious follies, they seem not tragic but comic to you, thus isolated as you are on the waters and free from it all. You think of landsmen as on a stage. And, again, the majesty of the Land itself takes its true place and properly lessens the mere interest in one's fellows. Nowhere does England take on personality so strongly as from the sea.

—Hilaire Belloc, "Off Exmouth"



CHAPTER 1



COASTING

The Marriner having left the vast Ocean, and brought his Ship into Soundings near the Land, amongst Tides or Streams, his Art now must be laid aside, and Pilottage taken in hand, the nearer the Land the greater the Danger, therefore your care ought to be the more.

Being in Tides-ways, narrow Channels, Rocks and Sands, I hope the ingenious Mariner will not take it amiss in recommending this to your care, your Tides, Courses, Soundings, and the goodness of your Compasses.

Captain Greenville Collins, *Great Britain's Coasting Pilot*, 1693

All morning the sea has been gray with rain under a sky so low that the masts of the boat have seemed to puncture the soft banks of cloud overhead. The water is listless, with just enough wind to make the wavelets peak and dribble dully down their fronts. Sails hang in loose bundles from their spars as the boat trudges on under engine, dragging its wake behind it like a long skirt.

The engine, the engine. Its thump and clatter, all mixed up with the smell of diesel oil and the continuous slight motion of the sea, is so regular and monotonous that you keep on hearing voices in it. Sometimes, when the revs are low, there's a man under the board reciting poems that you vaguely remember in a resonant bass. Sometimes the noise rises to the bright nonsense of a cocktail party in the flat downstairs. At present, though, you're stuck with your usual cruising companion at sixteen hundred revs, an indignant old fool grumbling in the cellar.

Where'd I put it? Can't remember. Gerroff, you, blast and damn you. Where'd I put it? Can't remember. Sodding thingummy. Where'd I put it? Can't remember.

Way out in front, England shows as a dark smear between the sea and the sky like the track of a grubby finger across a windowpane—a distant, northern land. We're crossing in the cold fifties of latitude, as far from the warm middle of the world as Labrador at one end of it and the Falklands at the other. The light is frugal, watery, and it always falls aslant, even in high summer. The sun, when it manages to find a break in the cloud, fills the landscape with shadows. It's no wonder that England, seen from the sea, looks so withdrawn, preoccupied and inward—a gloomy house, all its shutters drawn, its eaves dripping, its fringe of garden posted against trespassers.

All the pilot books warn one of the dangers of an English landfall. The *Admiralty Pilot* cautions all those who sail up from the south: "Fogs, bad weather and the long nights of winter frequently render it impossible to obtain a position ... under such circumstances the

course steered, the log, lead and nature of bottom are the seaman's only guides." The first signs of England aren't very encouraging either:

The edge of soundings may generally be recognised in fine weather by the numerous rippings in its vicinity; and in boisterous weather by a turbulent sea and by the sudden alteration in the colour of the water from dark blue to a disturbed green.

The sea is never still. Even when it's calm, the tides sweep at speed along the English coast racing round headlands and throwing up acres of churning white water—water so violent and unnavigable that even big cargo boats have been lost in these rapids and overfalls.

There are ledges of submerged rock designed to rip your floor out from under you, hidden shoals of gluey mud, and such a lacework of sandbars and narrow channels that even Her Majesty's chartmakers get into a helpless tangle about what is properly England and what is properly Ocean. This serpentine and tricky coast is ringed around with devices to scare ships off, back into the deep water where they're safe. Bell buoys clang, lights flash. On console screens in wheelhouses and on ships' bridges, radar beacons paint their warnings like flashing white exclamation marks, glowing and fading, glowing and fading. When the fog comes down (and it's never long before the fog *does* come down) the diaphones in all the lighthouses along the shore begin to moo, making a noise so bottomless and sinister that you'd think it could be heard only in a nightmare. England's message to every ship that gets near to her coast could hardly be clearer: DANGER—KEEP OUT.

The navigator, now anxiously busy with his 4B pencil and parallel rules, will know a bit about the reputation of the natives of this place, which is not good. The Roman poet Virgil, one of the earliest foreign observers, wrote that "Britons are wholly sundered from all the world." They're famous for their insular arrogance and condescension. They love fine social distinctions and divisions and are snobbishly wedded to an antique system of caste and class. Yet the upper lips of this superior race are so notoriously stiff that they can barely bring themselves to speak, preferring to communicate in monosyllables interleaved with grunts and silences. They are aggressively practical and philistine, with a loud contempt for anything that smells abstract or theoretical. They are a nation of moneygrubbers and bargain hunters, treasuring pennies for treasuring's sake. When the English reach for a superlative to praise someone for his general moral excellence, they say he has a "sterling character," meaning that he has some of the same quality as the coins which they like to chink noisily in their pockets.

When it comes to sex, they are furtive and hypocritical—and their erotic tastes are known to be extremely peculiar. Many Englishmen will pay a woman money to take their trousers down and spank them. Others cultivate a neoclassical passion for small boys—preferably boys of a lower caste or another color. For the most part, though, the English, both men and women, are afflicted by such a morbid decay of the libido that it has always puzzled the rest of the world how the English manage to reproduce themselves at all.

They are casually rude—a vice which they claim as a virtue by labeling it forthrightness. They are also violent; feared in all the neighboring countries of Europe for the marauding hooligans who accompany their football teams and sometimes murder spectators who have come to cheer a rival side. In compensation, however, they are softhearted about animals, for which they have an arsenal of sentimental nicknames, like "pooches," "bunnies," "pussies"

and “feathered friends.” Yet they enjoy dressing up in ceremonial outfits to go round the country on horseback setting packs of dogs on foxes. When the fox has been dismembered, it is the English custom to smear the faces of little girls with its blood. This sport is a favorite subject with the artists who design English Christmas cards. The English are addicted to cheese. But they detest garlic, a vegetable associated with “foreigners,” who are held in more or less universal contempt and are the main butts of the jokes which the English like telling to each other. These jokes are bartered in public places, and they increase in value as they grow older and more familiar. For the English are very famous—at least among themselves—for their sense of humor and pronounce it an essential component of a sterling character.

The pilot books, the folklore and the weather (“Cloud amounts are everywhere high at all seasons; depressions may occur in long series at any time of the year”) don’t exactly make one’s heart leap at the prospect of England. But all that’s forgotten in the high excitement of making a landfall as the coastline across the water slowly thickens and takes shape. It is a wonderful conjuring trick. The land surfaces lazily out of the sea, first gray and indistinct, then flecked with hazy color, then decorated with a sudden scatter of sharpening details—a broad scoop of chalky cliff, a striped beacon like a stick of seaside candy, a continuous waterfall of slate roofs down the slope of a valley. There is something satisfyingly eerie about a landfall—any landfall. The growing coast ahead, no matter how exhaustively charted it is or how old and familiar its history and internal topography, looks so imaginary from this sea distance. Watching it come slowly alive, inseparable from its broken reflection in the water, you feel that you’re making it up as you go along. It’s not *real*. On a green hill above the town you see a fine, brand-new medieval castle—turrets, towers, keeps, drawbridges, the lot. Like a novelist toying with an invented landscape on the page, you think, *That won’t wash*; and obedient to the thought, the handsome castle rubs itself out and in its place there comes up a stolid clump of gas-storage tanks or the cooling towers of a power station.

Downstairs, the engine is talking to itself. *Pease-porridge hot, pease-porridge cold, Pease-porridge in the pot, nine days old*. The floor rolls a little in the swell and the land sinks under the sea again. When it reappears, it rises from the water changed. There are people out there now. A lone wind surfer, clinging to a sail painted in the brilliant acrylic colors of a tropical butterfly, skims and flits through the surviving trelliswork of a burned-out pier and the sunless beach is dotted about with matchstick men. A little espionage with the binoculars and you can catch their swollen images, swimming and jerking in the lenses. Anglers, spaced at wide intervals along the pebbly shore, squat under their golf umbrellas with thermos flasks. A man is throwing a stick for a giant poodle—the only creature in sight which looks properly dressed for the weather. Families huddle in small self-absorbed groups in the shelter of seaweedy groins. Some people are laid out, entirely alone, on towels, as in the aftermath of an accident. On the wet promenade, a psychedelic ice cream van betrays the improbable fact that this is summer.

As a first glimpse of the natives of the place, the scene will do nicely. “The English take their pleasures sadly after the custom of their country,” said Maximilien de Béthune in 1633, a remark for which the *Admiralty Pilot* might usefully find room, just as it might point out that the English bell buoys manage to strike a much lower, clangier and more dismal note than the tinkling French counterparts on the south side of the Channel.

With the soundings getting shallower every minute, this is too close for comfort. Bearing

mind the shoals that lie inshore, you turn the wheel and haul the rudder round, leaving England to slide slowly past on the beam, a mile and a half, a world, away.

I took to coasting early on in life. To begin with, the word was used to stain my character.

“Raban has coasted through yet another term, and I can hold out little hope for his prospects in the forthcoming Examinations.”

My father was reading my housemaster’s report aloud over the after-breakfast litter in the parsonage dining room. The Easter sunlight was blue with pipe smoke and thick with dust.

“Coasted? Through yet *another* term?”

For days I had been dreading the arrival of the brown envelope with the Worcester postmark. Now it had come, there was something soothing in its dreary litany of undistinguished sins. The boy described in it was lazy. He showed no house spirit, no tea spirit, no application and precious little intelligence. On the page headed GEOGRAPHY, there was just one word—“Slack,” followed by an irritable squiggle of a signature. My father read on, in the same voice that he used to say weekday Evensongs in a church empty except for three devout old ladies. The recitation was making me feel sleepy.

The cassock that my father wore had belonged to my grandfather before him, and before that it had been my Great-uncle Cyril’s. Generations of clerical wear had given its black threads a lizardy sheen. It looked as old as the Church of England.

At thirteen I was easily fooled by clothes, and this aged cassock made my father himself seem like a very old man to me, a tall and shaggy Abraham whose presence in a room was enough to make any child shiver a little in awe at a famous patriarch. He was thirty-six. Sitting now in another dusty room, its air thickened with pipe smoke of the same brand, I find myself staring back, puzzledly, at a man much younger than myself—a man with a pained boy’s face, his own hurt showing, as if it were he and not his son who was being dressed down by the schoolmasters. His hair is black and thick, his skin unlined. His preposterously old clothes only serve to underline his youth as he returns my gaze—astonished to find himself the father to this bulky, balding fellow, in his forties.

It was my father’s uniforms that I saw—never my father in person. When he came home from The War (there was only one war then), he was in battledress, and at three I embarked on a dangerous romantic affair with his rough army khaki. I was a secret transvestite. Finding his tunic, impregnated with manly sweat and St. Bruno Flake, sprawled on a chair back, I pulled it round my own shoulders and felt the tickle of its doormat bristles against my bare arms and neck. It weighed me down; its giant waist and mighty sleeves trailed behind me on the floor. A major’s embroidered crown was sewn onto each epaulette, and the colored stripes of campaign ribbons on its left breast was decorated with a miniature bronze oak leaf to show that my father had been mentioned in dispatches.

I was found, and shamed, by indulgent grown-up laughter. Later, though, when the night light guttered in the draft on the table beside my cot, I lay dreaming furiously of the soldier’s imprint of the coarse cloth on my skin. I fell asleep putting Germans to the sword, in a rainbow of ribbons and oak leaves.

It was five years later that I learned to chant *amo, amas, amat* and parse *pater* and *patriam*—father and fatherland. It was one of the few things in Latin that I ever understood, the intimate connection between those two words. For England really was my father’s land, not

mine. It was the country where the uniformed warrior-priest, returned hero and man of God was at home. Blue-chinned, six-foot-two, robed in antique black and puffing smoke like a storybook dragon, my father was a true Englishman—and I knew that I was always going to be far too puny, too weak-spirited, ever to wear his clothes except in make-believe.

“Wouldn’t you say, old boy ...” he said, tamping his pipe with his forefinger, “that it was about time that you put a pretty abrupt end to this ... coasting?”

Beyond the leaded windowpanes, the uncut lawn was spattered with early dandelions like so many teaspoonfuls of scrambled egg.

“Yes.”

“Yes *what?*”

“Yes, Daddy.”

The truculence on my part was a bold affectation. Every time I looked my father in the eye, I felt the depth of my own failure. He represented all the things that I knew that I was doomed to flunk. In an austere time, when people still carried ration books and everyone’s clothes were darned and patched, my father was Austerity itself. Once a week he bathed in two and a quarter inches of lukewarm water. Carving a Sunday joint, he peeled off the meat in slivers as fine as microscopic slides; you could see shafts of gray daylight through the lean. With razor blades, he performed miracles of honing, wiping, drying, and gave the something close to everlasting life. There was nothing mean in his approach to domestic economy—he was just keeping perfectly in step with the times. His thrift and self-denial, his willingness to tighten his belt when the call came made him a pedigreed specimen of Winston Churchill’s bulldog breed.

What I saw across the breakfast table—and saw with the pitiless egotism of the thwarted child—was not my father, it was England. Towering over the stoved-in shells of the pullet eggs in their floral ceramic cups, there sat the Conservative Party in person, the Army in person, the Church in person, the Public School system in person, the Dunkirk Spirit in person, Manliness, Discipline, Duty, Self-sacrifice and all the rest. His threadbare cassock clothed the whole galaxy of terrible abstractions.

Seeing him now through different eyes, I find myself watching a sorrowful lean and angular young man, hopelessly lost for words. He coughs. He reaches for a brass ashtray made from the base of an old artillery shell and knocks out his dottle in it. He makes a busy show of burying my school report under a bill from the gas company and an overdraft notice from Lloyds Bank. He searches the face of his child for a clue as to how to go on, and finds there only a vacant, resentful, supercilious gaze—a mask more impenetrable than the mask he presents to his son.

The child is blind to all this. He’s putting the finishing touches to his Bored Aristocrat face. His eyeballs are rolled so high that he can’t see anything much except his own eyelashes. He is levitating. Inch by inch he rises Above This World, leaving his father down at the breakfast table with the smashed eggs. He is afloat over England. Airborne.

The young man pretends to study the columns of advertisements on the front page of *The Times*. Eventually he says: “D’you think—old boy—that there’s any way we can do something about this business of—Geography?”

The astral child replies (in a fine and withering phrase that he’s filched from the lips of his housemaster, Major MacTurk): “I don’t know and I couldn’t care less.”

This was very barefaced stuff. I cared. Had I seen any way of worming my way into my father's exacting version of England, I'd have leaped at it. Give me only the legs for the job and I'd score the winning try in the house match and bring home the family bacon. I'd furnish the parsonage with prizes—the Latin prize, the Greek prize, the Colonel's Efficiency Shield, and the leather-bound set of Macaulay awarded annually for Outstanding Contribution To The Life Of The School.

Every morning in chapel I stood singing manly hymns:

"I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trin-i-tee—"

Overhead were the richly scrolled and varnished pine boards emblazoned with the names of boys from the school who had attained the ultimate in English citizenship. *DULCE ET DECORUM EST PRO PATRIA MORI*. There were hundreds of them, every name picked out in scarlet edged with gold, with their houses and the dates at which they'd attended the school. In the 1914–18 war, the Old Boys had done the school proud, dying in whole dormitoryfuls; in 1939–45 they were enough to man a platoon-and-a-bit or put on a Shakespeare play.

For a would-be Englishman, there was clearly some sort of opening here. Some of the certificated heroes had probably been as dim as I was, yet they had still managed to go over the top, buy it, or meet a bullet with their name on it—expressions which, in 1955, didn't yet sound dated in the least. But did LAYCOCK, R. W. P. (SCHOOL HOUSE 1938–1943) have asthma, hay fever and flat feet too? I bet he didn't. The chances were that the Army wouldn't want me for services at all—and if it did, I'd probably land up as a lance-corporal in the Pioneer Corps digging latrines in Wales.

So I looked at my father with his campaign ribbons, his priestly vocation, his pipe, his English reticence, and knew I'd never make the grade. Maybe there was some run-down South American republic where I might have passed myself off as an averagely respectable type, but it wouldn't wash in England—at least, not in the dutiful, constrained, genteel 1950s England that I knew. The schoolmasters were unarguably right when they dismissed me as a hopeless coaster.

The dictionary does the word proud. To coast is to proceed without great effort, to move by momentum or force of gravity, to march on the flank of, to skirt, to sail from port to port of the same country, to explore or scour, to bicycle downhill without pedaling, and to slide down a slope on a sled. The coaster—as my school report pointed out in no uncertain terms—is someone who uses the minimum of effort to go down a slippery slope on the margin of things.

The coaster never stays in one berth longer than he can help. He'll take on any cargo for a short distance—coal, scrap iron, timber, day-old chicks. He doesn't quite belong either to the land or to the ocean. He is a betwixt-and-between man, neither exactly a citizen nor exactly a foreigner. Choosing to live on the shifting frontier where the land meets the water and the water shades into the land, he has to make himself the master of a specialized kind of knowledge not taught in English public schools. Admiral Smyth's *The Sailor's Word Book* of 1867 puts it nicely:

COASTING, or To Coast Along. The act of making a progress along the sea-coast of any country, for which purpose it is necessary to observe the time and direction of the tide, to know the reigning winds, the roads and havens, the different depths of water,

and the qualities of the ground.

It makes a happy metaphor for a life on the fringe. For years I coasted, from job to job, place to place, person to person. At the first hint of adverse weather I hauled up my anchor and moved on with the tide, letting the reigning winds take care of the direction of the voyage. In writing I found a good coaster's occupation, unloading my mixed cargoes at one port after another. The writer, sitting alone in a room, watching society go past his window and trying to re-create it by playing with words on a page, has his own kind of sea distance ... a sense of pushing up-Channel on a lumpy swell while the men and women on the shore go comfortably about their business, caring nothing about the pitch and roll and flap of the solitary small vessel on the horizon.

It was only a matter of time before the metaphor insisted on making itself actual. I was nearly forty, a little older than my father, when I bought a real boat, fitted it up as a floating house and set out to sail alone around the British Isles. It was rather late in the day to run away to sea (thirteen is supposed to be the standard age for that chronically English escapade) but I wasn't going to let ordinary caution or common sense get in the way of the imperious compulsion. I was besotted by the idea. Britain still seemed to be somehow more my father's land than my own—and home is always the hardest place to get into sharp focus. If only it could be *encompassed* ... by a slow, stopping, circular voyage ... if only one could go back to all the stages and places of one's own life, as a stranger, out of the blue ... couldn't one emerge at the end as a domestic Columbus, the true discoverer of a doorstep empire? With all the ardent solemnity of a thirteen-year-old, at thirty-nine I saw my trip as a test, reckoning, a voyage of territorial conquest, a homecoming.

I was not alone. I was bringing up the rear of a long queue of certifiable obsessives. The notion of taking to a boat and grandly coming to terms with one's native land is one that regularly presents itself to a certain dubious brand of Englishman, and I should have felt more disturbed than I was by the company I found myself keeping.

John MacGregor stood at the head of the line; and MacGregor's book, *The Voyage Alone in the Yawl "Rob Roy,"* started a national craze for solitary coastal voyaging when it came out in 1867. MacGregor had a lot to live up to and a lot to prove: his father was a famous general and when the infant John was plucked safely from a shipwreck in the Bay of Biscay at the age of five weeks, the incident was held by the MacGregor family to be a clear case of Divine Intervention, in the same category, if not quite of the same rank, as the Virgin Birth.

MacGregor grew up to be a crashingly hearty Victorian bachelor. In an age untainted by the suspicions fed on Freud and Krafft-Ebbing, he was able, as an evangelical philanthropist, to devote his life to Boys. His mission was to rescue street arabs from the London slums for Christ and the open-air life. He worked for the Ragged Schools, to which all his fees as a lecturer and royalties as an author were donated. He set up the Shoebblack Brigade (whose battalions of small boys, each equipped with brushes and polish, used to assemble every morning in the Strand at seven, to sing hymns and say prayers under MacGregor's enthusiastic conductorship), and was a co-founder of the *Boy's Own Paper*.

His adventures at sea started with the *Rob Roy* canoe, a craft he designed himself so that his boys could paddle their way to piety at weekends. He held Sunday rallies on the Thames, half regattas and half prayer meetings, in which every time a canoe capsized another boy was

simultaneously cleansed of his London dirt and washed in the blood of the Lamb.

After a series of canoeing adventures in the Holy Land and Scandinavia, MacGregor built himself a new boat, a 21-foot yawl planked in Honduras mahogany, with a cabin, a galley and a half-decked cockpit that looked as if it were closely modeled on a preacher's pulpit. He took on a cargo of "several boxes of Testaments, books, pictures, and interesting papers, in different tongues," and set sail for Paris by way of the Thames Estuary, the South coast of England and the Seine. "Truly," he wrote, "there is a sea-mission yet to be worked. Good news was told on the water long ago, and by the Great Preacher from a boat." Wherever he docked he handed out Bibles and "interesting papers" to passing tourists, fishermen, bargemen and longshoremen. "The distribution of these was a constant pleasure to me. Permanent and positive good may have been done by the reading of their contents."

He supplied his own illustrations, and on page 18 of *The Voyage Alone* he treated his readers to a flattering portrait of the Author At Home, in which MacGregor reclined majestically against a bolster in his pulpit-cockpit, his mustaches waxed to icicle-like points, his eyes hard and bright as a pair of chipped flints as he gazes out to sea. His finely sculpted head is turbaned against the sun, and he appears to be tipping from a mug, but the prominent teapot on the deck beside him is there to reassure you that MacGregor's liquor is definitely nontoxic. Investigation of the crosshatching with a magnifying glass reveals an open bible propped against the gunwale.

Here is exactly the sort of Englishman that Thomas Arnold's Rugby was created to manufacture. You could trust the colonization of Africa, or the management of the Sheffield steel industry, to this sturdy open-necked figure who exudes the Victorian virtues of Temperance, Probity, Resolution and Independence. Setting himself up as the very type of the hero of the age, MacGregor shows a well-built athlete sailing westward in the service of God and Queen.

Out at sea, MacGregor meditated on the condition of England:

In all our great towns there is a mass of human beings whose want, misery, and filth are more patent to the eye, and blatant to the ear, and pungent to the nostrils than in almost any other towns in the world. Their personal liberty is greater, too, than anywhere else. Are these two facts related to each other? Is the positive piggery of the lowest stratum of our fellows part of the price we have to pay for glorious freedom as guaranteed by our "British Constitution"? and do we not pay very dearly then? Must the masses be frowsy to be free?

From the long-distance perspective afforded by *Rob Roy* running before the wind off Southsea, the answers to the nation's problems came pat: what was needed was "strong Tory government" and a great Christian crusade.

The Voyage Alone became a Victorian best-seller, not for its religious or political content but because it managed to glorify yachting as much more than a mere sport. MacGregor turned sailing a small boat into a species of high moral endeavor. He wrote infectiously of the pleasures of the business. *Rob Roy* was, he said, "my floating freehold," and the water was "my road, my home, my very world." His somewhat embroidered adventures at sea were conveyed in the elementary heroic prose which was to become the standard note of the *Boys Own Paper*. Yet simple adventure and simple pleasure weren't enough in themselves. Wh

was needed was a sense of uplift; and when MacGregor saw yachts, he didn't see a collection of rich men's toys, about which they ought to feel a stab of Christian guilt as they left the office on Friday for a long weekend's messing about on the water, but rather—

That noble fleet of roaming craft which renew the nerve and energy of so many Englishmen by a manly and healthful enterprise, opening a whole new element of nature, and nursing a host of loyal seamen to defend our shores.

If MacGregor was an ace at flattering himself, he was also very clever at buttering up his readers. It was from MacGregor that the amateur sailor learned that he wasn't just indulging himself in a hobby, he was sailing for Victoria, England and Saint George.

One contemporary reader of the book was Empson Edward Middleton, a disgruntled officer in the Indian army, a man whose head was peppered with stings from the swarm of bees that he kept in his bonnet. He was the first man to sail singlehanded round the British Isles, and in *The Cruise of The Kate* he explained how his own voyage started:

My wearied thoughts were wandering down the High Street of Southampton, during the Christmas week of 1868, and conducted tired limbs to the excellent circulating library of Messrs. Gutch, where faded eyesight fell upon a work bearing the title of *The Voyage Alone in the Yawl Rob Roy*. An instant sympathy with its contents created an exchange of matter; five shillings causing a deficiency of ballast in one pocket, while extracted essence of old clothes created a bulge in my starboard coat, correcting my proper trim, and allowing me to cruise to my usual station without more rolling than was actually necessary, in proportion to the paved or muddied depressions on the way. All hail *The Voyage Alone*.

He commissioned an enlarged replica of *Rob Roy*, and had his boat personally inspected by MacGregor before he put to sea. *The Kate*, also a yawl, was 25 feet long (according to *Lloyd's Register*) or 23 feet (according to Middleton, who was probably foreshortening it for heroism's sake). The big difference between the two boats—and the two voyages they made—was in their cargoes.

Middleton loaded *The Kate* with his own discontents. He was a misunderstood genius whose inner nobility had gone unrecognized. He had proved conclusively that the earth was—not quite flat, exactly, but bowl- or saucer-shaped. This important discovery had not been taken up by the Royal Geographical Society or the British Academy with anything like the excitement it deserved. He had also worked out that Heaven was located in the Sun whose rays were emitted by the combined souls of the blessed—another theory in which no one seemed to be at all interested. At the time of his voyage he was “engaged in the production of an arduous literary labour,” the verse translation to end all verse translations of Virgil's *Aeneid*, of which several samples were smuggled into *The Cruise of The Kate*:

A sylvan scene adorns the dizzy height;
A gloomy grove refracts a softened light
On grotts, and cooling springs within a cave
Where nymphs resort to dabble in the wave.

No eager publisher came forward with a contract, and Middleton smelled the London literary conspiracy at work. One surefire best-seller—a translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, “in large print for the poor to read”—had already been rejected. Middleton was making the unoriginal discovery that publishers are astonishingly stupid and shortsighted and are in the business only of promoting their friends.

So he went to a vanity press and had privately printed a fat pamphlet called *The World of Wonders*—a digest of his Latin translations, his scientific theories, his quarrels with various authorities, his cures for rheumatism and gout. The after-locker of *The Kate* was packed solid with copies, which he proposed to distribute round Britain on the model of MacGregor and his tracts and bibles. Like MacGregor’s, Middleton’s voyage was a sea mission, a crusade of enlightenment. Brave, cranky and in deadly earnest, he taught himself to sail in a week on the Solent, and set out to conquer his native land.

The Cruise of The Kate is a solemn chronicle. Wherever he stepped ashore, Middleton came face to face with the insolence and cupidity of his fellowmen. The builders were lazy and failed to finish his boat on schedule. Pilots overcharged him. Navigational aids, like buoys and lighthouses, were deliberately put in the wrong places, in order to tempt Middleton to shipwreck. Hoteliers refused to cash his checks. He saw himself as a stoned martyr in a naughty world, and stubbornly went on telling the good news. “*The World of Wonders Magazine* made me numberless friends.”

The dominant tone of the book is pained and blustery. Middleton’s voice is that of the well-spoken bore with a gigantic chip on his shoulder:

I can assure the world at large that I am about the last man to care about publicity; I do not care one straw for praise; I would not care one straw if praise were purposely withheld, where there could be no doubt that it was my due. What do I want of my fellows? I want their esteem, their goodwill, but not their praise. What am I driving at? You will see. I have stated that I do not care about publicity; but I have wished before today to be a voice in my own nation, to be able to speak when I like, to hold my tongue when I like. Such is my idea of society, and I would associate with the nation; nothing less than the nation will please me.

Middleton’s habit of continually asking himself questions and immediately answering them makes it miserably clear that no one else ever asked him the questions whose answers he was burning to expound. His aggrieved loneliness stares so vividly through his writing that *The Cruise of The Kate* deserves a place among the classic psychiatric case histories.

He wasn’t built for society. Yet as long as he remained offshore, his mortally bruised ego did find some measure of comfort. The sea—huge, empty, frightening and unpredictable—provided a kind of objective correlative for Middleton’s gross inner solitude, and he found himself more at home at sea than he had ever been on land. The sea never ridiculed him. Alone in *The Kate*, like a cross baby adrift in a cradle, he was secure for the first time in his adult life. When passing fishermen threw him a few herrings to cook on the hob of his dangerous coal fire, or shouted helpful directions to him across the water, he even found a kind of human companionship that had evaded him on shore.

Middleton was, perhaps, not quite so alone as he believed himself to be. Among his contemporaries there was at least one other subscriber to his theory that Heaven was situated

in the sun—the London stockbroker and yachtsman R. T. McMullen, whose book *Down Channel* is still read by amateur sailors as the best-known personal account of coasting British waters. McMullen's continuing appeal certainly can't be explained by his talent as a writer, which was rudimentary. His surly record of courses sailed, weather encountered and ports entered would set no one's imagination alight—unless there was something in the character of the man himself that found an answering chime in the character of his seagoing readers.

McMullen was above all else a tidy man. He hated messiness and excess. Catholicism, with its ripe symbolism and its unseemly pandering to the sensations with candles, vestments, incense and the rest, revolted him. He was the author of a choleric pamphlet called "Priestly Pretensions and God's Work," in which he detected Romans under the beds of half the vicarages and rectories of the Church of England. In social matters, too, he abhorred the least hint of disorder. Trades unionists were members of The Idler's Union; and those passages of *Down Channel* which are most nearly vivid are the bits where he is abominating the smell, laziness and general scurrility of the lower classes. Paid hands, fishermen, harbor employees are treated by McMullen with testy condescension.

His book is governed by a single sentence: "In language too mild to express my real sentiments, I dislike a sloven; a slovenly reef, a slovenly furl and a dirty mast look disgraceful on a yacht of any pretensions." The Church was a slack ship—Gladstone's England was a slack ship—but McMullen ran a succession of tight ships; ships offered as exemplary models of the social order as it might be in an ideal world, every line coiled just so, every shroud taut, every paid hand set firmly in his proper place in the fo'c's'le. At sea, McMullen put England to shame.

This cold stockbroker's utopia found a large and approving audience. His Protestant authoritarianism has gone down very well with the men's men who prop up yacht club bars. He is himself the model of a certain kind of Englishman, with his contempt for clutter and show, his philistine certainties about how things should be run and his chauvinist attitude toward women. At the beginning of *Down Channel* he does tersely vouchsafe the existence of a "Mrs McMullen"—that, indeed, she shared some of his voyages, or was, at least, to be found in the galley during the course of them. She is never mentioned thereafter.

The most memorable thing about McMullen, and his outstanding qualification as a sterling English hero, was the way he died. On June 14, 1891, he was sailing alone in his 27-foot yawl, *Perseus*, somewhere in the English Channel, when a heart attack killed him. Two days later, *Perseus* was spotted by a fishing boat off Cherbourg. It was maintaining a steady westward course, its sails tight and filled with wind. The dead man, his limbs locked in *rigor mortis*, was keeping a firm grip on the tiller. If a member of the French lower orders (a category which had given McMullen no end of trouble during his life) had not unsportingly intervened, he might well be still sailing today.

McMullen, prematurely conducted to his paradise in the sun, must have blazed with pure rage when he saw Hilaire Belloc, a generation later, out in the *Nona*. Belloc was a Catholic and ran his boat in a state of happy catholic disorder. In *The Cruise of the Nona* he exhorted his readers, McMullen fashion, to *Get everything shipshape and, so far as you can, keep everything shipshape*. Then he confessed.

My own boat has usually come into port more like the disturbed nest of a dormouse

than like the spick and span arrangement which I advise. Half the blocks will be jammed, the anchor will be caught under the bows, and as like as not, the fluke of it hooked over one of the whiskers. The falls will be all tangled up together. The warping ropes will be mixed up with the anchor chain in the fo'c's'le, so that there is no getting at the one, or paying out the other. She will perhaps be coming in under three reefs with hardly enough wind to move her, because it has been blowing a few hours ago, and I have been too lazy to shake them out. Her jib will be slack, her cabin light broken where I have put my heel through it ...

But the amiable sloppiness which reigned on Belloc's boat did not—unfortunately—correspond to his vision of how things should be managed in society. Of all the lone sailors who have coasted round Britain and used the sea as a place of meditative exile, Belloc is much the most frightening.

He took to the *Nona* in pessimism and bereavement. His young wife had died (Belloc wore black for the rest of his life); his brief political career, as Liberal member for Salford, was over. The *Nona*, of which he writes with a tenderness more suited to a lover than to a boat, was his chief remaining refuge. Lying at anchor on the water in the domestic snugger of the *Nona*'s lamplit cabin, Belloc was able to come close to re-creating the whispered confidence of the marriage bed. *The Cruise of the Nona* reads like pillow talk, with Belloc telling secrets about himself—and more disturbing secrets about England.

Half of the book is entrancing. Belloc loved, feared and respected the sea, and he wrote about it with more accuracy and conviction than anyone else in English bar Melville and Conrad. The sea brought out the best in the essentially theological tenor of his mind:

Sailing the sea, we play every part of life: control, direction, effort, fate; and there we can test ourselves and know our state. All that which concerns the sea is profound and final. The sea provides visions, darkneses, revelations—

Or (in a passage which I later pinned up in the cabin of my own boat and saw as the defining motto for this voyage, this book):

The cruising of a boat here and there is very much what happens to the soul of a man in a larger way.... We are granted great visions, we suffer intolerable tediums, we come to no end of the business, we are lonely out of sight of England, we make astonishing landfalls—and the whole rigmarole leads us along no whither, and yet is alive with discovery, emotion, adventure, peril and repose.

In Belloc, too, the sea is a place—or rather, a huge and rich assortment of particular places—as solid, real and recognizable as the individual landscapes of a continent. When he writes about the neck of sea between Bardsey Island and the Llyn Peninsula in a high gale, or about the great tide races of Portland Bill and St. Albans Head, or the luminous, mirrorlike entry to Port Madoc on a still summer evening, he does for water what landscape painters do for trees and rocks and architecture; he gives it unforgettable body and life.

For every page about the sea there is another about the land, and when Belloc looks back at the shore from which he has sailed, his pillow talk takes a dirty turn. The freedom of the

sea, the lapse of a few nautical miles between himself and the British coast, released in Belloc a flood of confidences which were better not told.

All his embitterment came tumbling out as he looked back at England. Belloc had failed as a parliamentarian, and so he despised parliaments, despised democracy itself. He talked of “the vomit” of parliamentary rule. The House of Commons he characterized as “the slime of the Lobbies.”

There is no form of parliamentary activity which is not deplorable, save in aristocracies.

For, in aristocracies, which are, of their nature, governments of a clique, a Parliament—which is a clique—can be normal and natural. In communities based on the idea of equality, and of action by the public will, they are cancers, under which such nations always sicken and may die.

For Belloc, England’s treason was her return to the rule of Parliament at the end of the First World War, instead of “continuing the rule of soldiers as [she] should have done.”

It is like listening to the rambling unconscious mind of a profoundly disappointed man whose sense of hurt has turned to poisonous spite. Belloc, with his copious fluency of language, makes the bluff irritations of plainer men like Middleton and McMullen seem trifling and beside the point. When Belloc hates, he hates with spine-chilling articulacy. At Clovelly, he sees some tourists, innocently debouching from a line of sightseeing coaches for a day at the seaside.

We heard a murmur like that of bees swarming. As we came nearer it was a confused clamour of human beings, and as we came nearer still we saw the dreadful thing in its entirety.

The day-trippers are “black ants”—“lost souls”—“dark clothed mortality”—“an immense mass”—“this mob”—“like black pressed German caviare, the acid stuff which is sold for the destruction of the race.” Tourists, politicians, Jews, (“Eh, Rosenheim? Eh, Guildenstern?”) pacifists, atheists, journalists are all lumped together in the same nightmare ball. They are the horrible Modern England from which the *Nona* is sailing away under as much linguistic canvas as she can carry.

Belloc sees one glimmer of hope on the European horizon—Mussolini, who had risen to power in Italy in 1922, three years before *The Cruise of the Nona* was published.

What a strong critical sense Italy has shown! What intelligence in rejection of sophistry, and what virility in execution! May it last!

The word “virility” crops up again and again in Belloc’s book. To be out in the open air sailing a small boat on a rough sea, was a “virile” thing to do—unlike the indoor, pallid, unmanly occupations of people in coach parties, or Jews or Members of Parliament. In 1922, Mussolini, Belloc met a man of his own stamp—exactly the right sort of hearty, Catholic fellow with whom he could comfortably quaff ale in the cockpit of the *Nona*.

What a contrast with the sly and shifty talk of your parliamentarian! What a sense of decision, of sincerity, of serving the nation, and of serving it towards a known end with a definite will! Meeting [Mussolini] after talking with the parliamentarians in other countries was like meeting with some athletic friend of one's boyhood after an afternoon with racing touts; or it was like coming upon good wine in a Pyrenean village after compulsory draughts of marsh water in the mosses of the moors above, during some long day's travel over the range.

Belloc manages to insinuate that if you fall for the virile maritime romance of *Yachting Monthly*, you may be guided by divine providence to the politics of *Mein Kampf*. The strange thing of all about his strange book was the way it was received in England. The *London Observer* said that Belloc "has never perhaps written better"; the *London Mercury* came purring up to Belloc, saying "*The Cruise of the Nona* is certainly the most companionable, possibly the most beautiful, of his books."

This, then, is the band of men which I was about to join as a raw recruit. They are a desperate bunch. Despair, or something very close to it, shows through their aggressive, bottle-nosed politics and aggressive, bottle-nosed religion. Even in ripe middle age, they are still neurotically anxious to prove their manliness, and the rigid authoritarian streak which fissures all their personalities looks like the symptom of some serious inner weakness. They are all lonely men—stiff and out of kilter with their times; and, as lonely men do, they see themselves as heroic prophetic outcasts. For each of them the sea is the prophet's necessary wilderness in which he must spend his ritual forty days and forty nights before coming home and enlightening the world with his awful news.

The *Rob Roy*, *The Kate*, *Perseus* and the *Nona* are a lot more than mere yachts. Loaded down on their marks with testaments, theories, dogmas and solutions, they are like arks of the Covenant; holy vessels bearing sacred texts. Jesus Christ ... Aristotle ... Malthus ... Mussolini ... each of the lone sailors puts to sea with a ghostly first mate. And the boats themselves are miniature ships of state, their trim style of domestic economy set side by side with the ramshackle and disordered house of England across the water.

Reading the books, I can feel their authors bristling irritably at me from behind their black masks of print. I'm not their sort of man at all: my politics are soft and wet, my taste indulgently urban, my home a dishevelment of unopened bills and untidied clothes. I am not shipshape. I am irreligious and a physical coward. Fear of getting hurt has kept me clear of dentists for a decade. The tips of my fingers go white at the first nip of cold. Among the objects generally thought to be desirable on voyages, I fall clearly into the same category as umbrellas and wheelbarrows.

I would no more try to stow away with MacGregor, Middleton, McMullen, Belloc, or the rest of the hearty gang, than I would have volunteered for service in the Ton-tons Macout. Yet here we are, assembled at the same dockside, our boats jostling together in the water. As we load up with provisions and brush against each other at the counter of the ship chandler's. We're much of an age. Well past the point where life still seems unrationed, we are all beginning to run short of teeth, hair, wind and options. What unites us more deeply is a compulsive itch for the escape valve of a wilderness, an open frontier, and our common

discovery that even now Britain does have a last frontier, in the sea.

For there's an obvious reason why this sudden craze for solitary coasting should have started when it did, in the 1860s. It is not so long since Britain had its own internal wildernesses—places into which people in search of solitude and some danger could literally disappear. In 1726, Defoe wrote of a visit to the Lake District in his *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*. He was much shaken by what he saw.

Here, among the mountains, our curiosity was frequently moved to enquire what high hill this was, or that. Indeed, they were, in my thoughts, monstrous high; but in a country all mountainous and full of innumerable high hills, it was not easy for a traveller to judge which was highest.

Nor were these hills high and formidable only, but they had a kind of an unhospitable terror in them. Here were no rich pleasant valleys between them, as among the Alps; no lead mines and veins of rich ore, as in the Peaks; no coal pits, as in the hills about Halifax, much less gold, as in the Andes, but all barren and wild, of no use or advantage either to man or beast ...

Here we entered Westmoreland, a country eminent only for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England, or even in Wales itself.

...

The “unpassable hills”, the “frightful appearances to the right and left,” made Defoe beat a fast retreat to civilization. In Westmoreland he had seen a landscape just as savage as anything to be found on the American Frontier. It's not hard to imagine a Donner Party, or an Alferd Packer (the man who is reputed to have eaten five of the seven Democrats in Hinsdale County, Colorado), in Defoe's aghast vision of the English Lakes.

Within a very few years no one could possibly have seen Cumberland and Westmoreland in Defoe's terms. The eighteenth-century vogue for the paintings of Claude Lorraine, and the importation, late in the century, of German romanticism, turned wild savagery into the merely picturesque. When Wordsworth (in 1799) wrote of “a huge peak, black and huge” striding after him in his “little boat” on Lake Windermere, he was fairly promptly ridiculed by Byron (in 1819) for—among a multitude of other things—the overblown grandeur of his conception of his own solitude in Nature.

We learn from Horace, Homer sometimes sleeps;
We feel without him Wordsworth sometimes wakes,
To show with what complacency he creeps
With his dear *Waggoners* around his lakes.
He wishes for ‘a boat’ to sail the deeps.
Of Ocean? No, of air. And then he makes
Another outcry for ‘a little boat’
And drivels seas to set it well afloat ...

By 1850, when Wordsworth died, the craggy English wilderness of leech gatherers and terrified small boys in little boats had become (largely by Wordsworth's own agency)

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