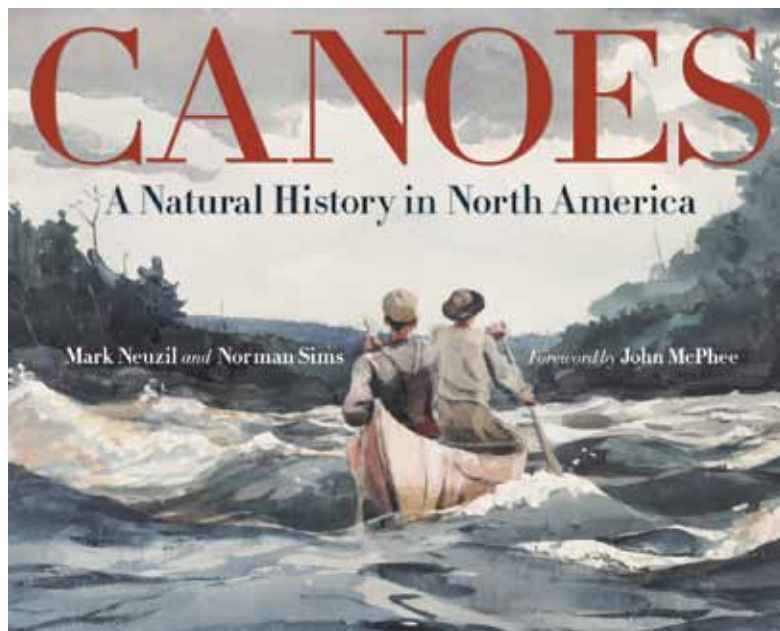


REVIEWS

REVIEW OF *CANOES: A NATURAL HISTORY IN NORTH AMERICA*

BY PATTI RUTKA



CANOES: *A NATURAL History in North America*, by Mark Neuzil and Norman Sims, with a forward by the legendary nonfiction writer John McPhee, is a delightful book that satisfies both intellectual curiosity and artistic appetite.

Tracing the history of the canoe in North America, the authors begin with the dugout. Subsequent sections move forward through time to examine ever-changing canoe design and usage, from birch bark canoes and their construction to the fur trade, to all wood canoes, then wood-and-canvas canoes, and finally, synthetic canoes. The book concludes with two chapters, the first on the human-powered movement, including a discussion about paddle shapes, environmentalism, and the Olympics; the second narrates its way through the magic and lure of canoe tripping. The volume incorporates sidebars, often with interviews of notable canoe builders or people influential in the canoe's development. The language throughout is

conversational, light-hearted at times, and makes for pleasant rather than dry reading. In other words it's accessible.

If all those enticements weren't enough to pull a reader along through the extensively researched history that the authors have clearly spent as much time laboring over as the refurbishing of a cedar strip canoe (the bibliography will reveal they've done their homework), the book is laden with beautiful paintings, drawings from antiquity, photographs, diagrams, war-time posters, and maps both old and new. Canoe restorers will salivate over the many styles of canoes designed, built, and produced in volume on this continent. The sidebars and insets are as illuminating and interesting from an historical standpoint as each major section.

Because this review is for a whitewater publication, I must mention the book's one omission that may distress some readers: while the synthetic canoe section touches briefly on ABS and the demise of Royalex

as it relates to whitewater canoes, there is no section covering the shapes or materials in modern whitewater canoes; the authors date themselves by stopping with their history around the late '80s.

In addition, I took mild umbrage at the authors' male bias, which leaks through the history they compile. So if you're a female whitewater paddler, brace yourself for a whiff of mansplaining. After a truly charming section on the historic phenomenon of canoedeling, a courting ritual from the turn of the 20th century in which the wooed woman would sit in the bow facing the man while he steered and played a Victrola, the authors move on to discuss canoe builders. Again dating themselves, they ask, "Is this a field where women can compete and thrive?" One answer the book gives is, "Some tasks might be challenging physically. I'm strong but I'm only 5'6"." If the authors had included a whitewater section for the book, their examination might have altered their take on canoe builders and they could



Top: Courting on Grand Canal in Belle Isle Park in the Detroit River, with Detroit, Michigan, on one side and Windsor, Ontario, on the other, c. 1900. Note the Victrola mounted in the canoe in the foreground.

Courtesy of the Detroit Publishing Company Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Bottom: Setting a frame for a bark canoe involved preparing the ground, driving in stakes, sliding in the bark, and attaching a frame in the general shape of the boat. This photography was taken c. 1895 at an Ojibwe camp.

Photo by T. W. Ingersoll, Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

have potentially avoided the quaintness of the question.

Minor objections aside, this is a fabulous book for anyone who's ever been in a canoe and has curiosity about the craft's noble history, or who's found granddad's old canoe in the rafters of the barn and would like to know what to do with it. Along with being highly readable and full of historic treasures, *Canoes* is equally a book to savor for its sumptuous artwork. It would look great on a coffee table, and would make a wonderful present for any paddler who has ever wondered how the fur trade was conducted, how canoes were used with sails at one point, or if their great grandparents became engaged in a canoe. All told, Neuzil and Sims have written an engaging and satisfying volume.

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