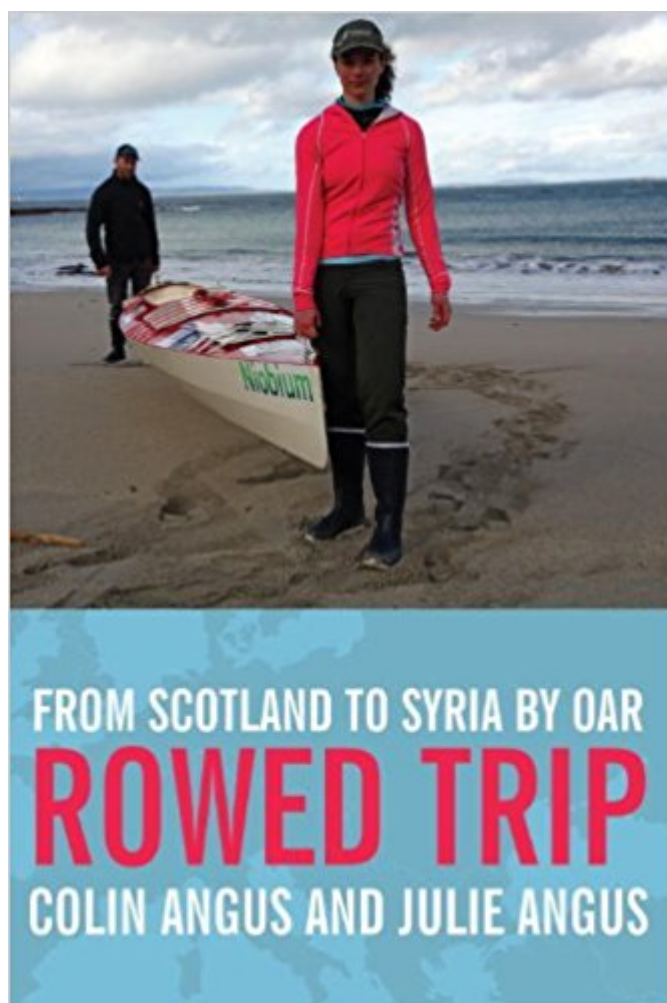


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Rowed Trip - From Scotland To Syria By Oar



Synopsis

Two bestselling authors combine their strengths in a travelogue, a search for roots, a romance and a seat-of-your-pants adventure. One sunny day in 2006, Julie and Colin Angus were talking about the future, as newly engaged couples do. More unusually, they were at the time travelling together from Moscow to Vancouver by human power – boat, bike, and foot. That day, they were examining a road atlas and in particular the labyrinth of European inland waterways it revealed. Julie traced a route of interconnected canals, rivers, and coastlines that led from Colin's parents' homeland of Scotland past her mother's homeland, Germany, and on to her father's, Syria. She said, half-seriously: We could row (yes, row, as in propelling a tippy little boat on a pond) all the way from Scotland to Syria to visit our relatives. It was a reckless sort of joke to make, given the couple's addiction to adventure. The result is *Rowed Trip*, an odyssey by oar (and bike) from Caithness, Scotland, across the English Channel, through France, across the Rhine, the Main-Donau Canal to the Danube, the Black Sea, the Bosphorous Straits, and the Mediterranean. Julie and Colin each describe how the trip allowed them to test their relationship, to explore their roots, and to indulge to the max their shared taste for adventure.

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Customer Reviews

Julie Angus (née Wafaei) has degrees in psychology, biology, and molecular biology. She has written for publications ranging from the National Post to *enRoute* and is the author of *Rowboat in a Hurricane*. Colin Angus set off at nineteen on a five-year, mostly solo, sailing odyssey. Since

then he has navigated some of the world's most challenging rivers. He has written for the Globe and Mail and Reader's Digest, and his books include *Beyond the Horizon*, *Lost in Mongolia* and *Extreme*. Together, Colin and Julie were the first people to travel around the world on human power, a journey documented in Colin's *Beyond the Horizon*. Rowed Trip is their first joint venture as writers.

1 THE RIGOURS AHEAD SCOTLAND (Colin) My family tree is not lush and bountiful. Instead, its branches have been savagely pruned; sometimes entire limbs were sheared off by the Darwinian forces at play in Scotland's far north. Traditionally, whisky production and fishing were the main livelihoods, meaning that those who didn't succumb to the sea were liable to drink themselves to death. When I was a young boy, my mother would tell me stories about her homeland. My eyes opened wide as she regaled me with tales of hairy cows, vast moors of mist-drenched heather and men who wore skirts yet had the fortitude to stare down the Romans. I was intrigued by this distant nation, awed by my mother's stories, and I knew that, through my heritage, I was indelibly connected to Scotland. Along with the tales of Robert Louis Stevenson told to me as I drifted to sleep, my mother's Scotland was filed in the part of my memory reserved for fiction, fantasy and folklore. And like the children in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, I felt I had a secret connection to another world. I was sure that one day I would make that journey. That day arrived in early March 2008. My wife, Julie, and I slipped over the border from England in a rental Dodge Caravan with two homemade rowboats strapped to the roof. The interior of the vehicle was in shambles, jammed to the ceiling with camping gear, bicycles, cameras, oars and a miscellany of other equipment. As we ventured farther north, following single-track lanes through unpopulated moors, horizontal rain and gale-force winds buffeted our top-heavy vehicle. Dark clouds scudded towards the elongated black hole of a horizon, and sodden sheep stood with their rumps to the wind. "It was a really gay day, wasn't it?" Julie said, breaking an extended period of silence. "What was a gay day?" "The day we decided to do this trip." I wasn't sure if she meant it was a happy day, which it was, or if the decision we made that day, which led to committing ourselves to a desolate, freezing world with only a tent for shelter and 7,000 kilometres to travel using only our arms and legs, was a dumb idea. A South Park kind of gay. I slowed the vehicle to allow a mass of soggy wool to cross the road. The trailing shepherd nodded to us, his face lost in the shadowy folds of a black poncho. "I suppose so," I said. "I'm sure this weather will clear up shortly." We'd come up with the idea for this journey two years earlier on a sunny day in Germany. At that time, Julie and I were engaged and were inadvertently testing the bonds of our relationship by travelling together from

Moscow to Vancouver solely by human power. The crux of the expedition was a 10,000-kilometre row (yes, row, as in propelling a tippy little boat on a pond) across the Atlantic Ocean. As we cycled across Europe, most of our thoughts were focused on the maritime challenge ahead, instead of the rich cultures, landscapes and architecture around us. And because of the urgency of reaching the Atlantic Ocean ahead of the stormy season, our route was mainly confined to busy highways. On occasion, these vast ribbons of fumed asphalt traversed rivers or canals, and we paused on the bridges to observe the scene below. River barges, rowboats and sailing dinghies plied murky waters bordered by orchards, farm fields and stone villages. Paths often flanked these waterways, and we watched enviously as cyclists followed meandering courses to nowhere. We noticed the road atlas we were using to navigate across Europe also outlined the waterways, and closer examination revealed Europe's labyrinth of water corridors. Julie traced a route of interconnected canals, rivers and coastlines that led from my parents' homeland of Scotland past her mother's home in Germany and on to Syria, where her father comes from. We could paddle all the way from Scotland to Syria and visit our relatives, she said half-seriously. Whether this comment was made in jest or not, a seed was planted. Over the following months, we researched the possibility of paddling or rowing from Britain to the Middle East. My family comes from Caithness in Scotland's most northeastern corner, so this was where we would start. From there, we could follow a network of canals, lakes, rivers and shorelines all the way through Britain to Dover. We'd row across the English Channel, then journey into Europe's interior by paddling up the Rhine River or navigating France's extensive network of canals. The European continental divide would be crossed on the manmade Rhine-Main-Danube Canal, which connects the Rhine River and the Danube. And once the headwaters of the Danube were reached, it would be possible to voyage downstream to the Black Sea, through the Bosphorus and finally on the Mediterranean to Syria. The plan appealed to our sense of adventure, but more importantly it promised to be a journey that would allow us to explore our roots in a more compelling fashion than a quick online genealogy search followed by a two-week tour package being bused to tourist shops selling stuffed Loch Ness monsters, Middle Eastern rugs and the made-in-China American Indian knick-knacks. No, this would be a seat-of-your-pants adventure that would immerse Julie and me into the cultural and physical forces that had shaped our families and made us who we are. It would give us greater perspective not only on our heritage but also on the distances and lands separating the regions we come from. The more we researched, though, the more we unearthed questions we could not answer. Would we be able to make our way against the swift current of the Rhine River? Would a human-powered craft be allowed to navigate the canal locks that are normally used by power boats? How difficult would voyaging the British coast be in

late winter? There was too much uncertainty, and although it was theoretically possible to travel on water for every inch of the journey, we felt an efficient portage system was required. Julie and I pondered the various possibilities, from lightweight canoes with padded yokes to sea kayaks and rugged dollies. We came to the conclusion that nothing on the market met our needs. "Maybe we could tow our boats behind bicycles," Julie said, thinking of the trailer she uses for cycling home with a heavy load of groceries. It seemed like a practical idea except for one thing: what would we do with the bikes and trailers while on the water? A sea kayak doesn't have the cargo capacity to carry such a load. While a canoe could easily carry a bicycle, it lacks the seaworthiness to cope with some of the rougher coastlines we planned on paddling. We considered using a dory, which is seaworthy and has sufficient cargo capacity, but decided the weight would be prohibitive. Eventually, we realized the ideal boats had yet to be made. We would have to make them ourselves. We designed the boats and built them in the backyard with plywood and fibreglass. They looked like large sea kayaks, but had sufficient cargo space to carry our bicycles, trailers and all our camping gear within sealed compartments. The boats were shaped so that in the event they capsized, all the water would drain from the cockpit when they were righted. They were also decked with watertight hatches, ensuring the equipment would stay dry in big waves or in the event of a capsize. As a finishing touch, we created a system that would allow them to be joined together as a catamaran with a platform large enough to erect the tent on. This arrangement would allow us to camp in urban areas where conventional tenting was not an option. We chose a sliding-seat rowing set-up because it provides much more power than paddling and would allow us to propel our burdened boats easily and quickly through the water. It also offers a full-body workout, exercising not just the arms and shoulders but also the back, stomach, buttocks and legs. If we were going to spend six months in a boat, we reasoned, we might as well get fit in the process. The trailers were custom made by Tony Hoar, a Vancouver Islander who specializes in making unique bicycle trailers. They were designed to disassemble and fit in the boats' centre compartment along with the bicycle. But despite our best efforts to build quality vessels, we worried that our amateur-built craft might not be up to a 7,000-kilometre journey. Now, as Julie and I drove in inky darkness with the boats on the roof of the van shifting dangerously in the heavy winds, I prayed our homemade contraptions would be able to withstand the rigours ahead. The vulnerability of their thin plywood bodies was accentuated in a world where stone seemed to offer the only true defence against the North Atlantic's wrath. As if to further emphasize the point, the crosswinds intensified, and we were forced to stop the van in the middle of nowhere to avoid losing our rooftop cargo. We had no choice but to wait for the weather to improve, and so we spread our sleeping bags in the back and fell

asleep in the violently shaking vehicle. The following morning, we reached our destination, Castletown, a village of about three thousand located six kilometres from mainland Britain's northernmost point. The surrounding landscape was a rocky moor with occasional stunted trees and pastureland. Swollen steel-grey waves collapsed onto a jagged shoreline next to the town, and wind snaked through the streets, lifting dust and rattling windows. The flagstone buildings were indifferent to gusts that almost bowled us over. Although my mother and father were born in Edinburgh and Glasgow respectively, their roots lie here. Castletown was where my paternal grandfather lived, descended from a line of shipbuilders and fishermen, while my maternal grandfather came from Wick, a coastal town 20 kilometres away. Between these two communities in the tiny oceanside hamlet of Keiss reside the last of my known relatives in this region. We checked into the town's sole hotel, a Victorian-era stone building. "Sinclair?" the proprietor sa...

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