

Sisters, Sunshine, and the Sea

By Claire Kirkby

Perhaps every journey begins with a question: a question you ask yourself or a question asked of you. For me it was the latter and it came from my sister in the spring of 2017, “Would you like to join me on a canoe brigade down the Sunshine Coast in June?” My answer came quickly and easily, as time with my sister is precious for all our adult life we have lived many provinces apart. Yes.

All occupants of tents nestled on the banks of the Salish Sea were awakened at four, a time too early for the song-birds morning chorus. I was amazed and thankful that my thin nylon shelter that barely held back the coastal dampness had shielded me from the predators I was sure lurked in the wooded darkness. My urban lungs greedily gulped the fresh pure air as I peered towards the canoes lashed to the docks. They tugged at their ropes with the anticipation of the journey ahead while waiting for the bodies needed to propel them forward. Soon the eighty paddles of the nine canoes would break the pre-dawn stillness of the inlet’s waters. The watchful, gliding eagles soar above, their wings finding the updraft of the coastal forests, screeching their warning of the Skookumchuk Narrows. Rocky boulders, solidly bent over, like two opposing giants who for centuries have refused to give way, their stubbornness creating a passage so narrow the waters rise and howl with every tidal change. Ebb tide was the necessity and promise of that early call. The water splashed and danced up the shaft of my paddle, its coldness fully awakening me to the realization of my eager and simple answer.

Yes, I thought, as I glanced ahead and saw my sister’s paddle dipping and rising to my same rhythm, we are here together, each of us experiencing our own journey but also experiencing the journey of the brigade whose organizers hoped to enlighten and educate its participants, in the spirit of Canada 150+. The “+” being to respectfully acknowledge, not only the Salish and the Squamish, through whose unceded territory we were traveling, but also all First Nations peoples as the original inhabitants and guardians of the nation we now call Canada.

At midday, as we rafted up at the mouth of Salmon Inlet, we saw firsthand the scars European settlers have left upon the land in their hunger for resources. Our gaze was directed towards the mountains, broad swatches bare of the majesty of Western hemlock, Amabilis and Douglas fir, red cedar, and Sitka spruce, replaced by the jarring grey of crumbling rock faces to which sapling trees, planted by university students dreaming of a summer filled with west coast adventure, tentatively cling. Being from Ontario most thought I was looking upon the side hills with neophyte eyes, only just seeing the destructive nature of the logging industry. I was indeed thinking of the destruction, a destruction one cannot truly comprehend from the distant perch of one’s canoe, as up this very inlet, my much younger self, was the camp cook who fueled the men who felled, chopped, dragged, loaded, and trucked away the imposing and magnificent conifers of the coastal forest. This I did not share.

In that same stretch of water we were again reminded of man’s indifference or ignorance, whether by want, need, or greed, of the fragility of the natural ecosystem. Rounding a bend the ominous glint of sun off steel abruptly contrasted with nature’s pristine beauty. It took a few moments to fully comprehend what we had encountered. It was a fish farm. Tucked away in a sheltered cove the fortress-like structure, with its garish yellow signs warning away trespassers, was the manifestation of the menacing threat these large aquaculture operations pose

to wild salmon. In silence we skirted the floating docks and their suspended nets that are home to Atlantic salmon, the nemesis of the Pacific, the wild and rightful inhabitants of these waters. Most, perhaps, thinking of the meals long digested, salmon bought and consumed without taking note of its origins and thus having no consideration for the toll one's gastronomical delight is having upon the ecosystem from whence it came.

Within a short paddle on the Salish Sea our brigade saw the negative effects these two industries, logging and aquaculture, has on the natural ecosystem. Many had read books or heard stories about such damage. We have all tried to negotiate the complicated question of how to balance the needs of our society for these resources and the need to harvest respecting the culture, intrinsic beliefs, and the generational connection to the coastal forests and waterways held by most First Nation peoples. Gazing upon the side hill devoid of old growth forest and being caught unexpectedly by the glare of the brazen metal poles rising skyward juxtaposed against the natural beauty of the inlet, as the salty sea lapped against the bow of my canoe, brought sobering reality to the words of both books and stories.

Heads bent, arms, shoulders, and backs pulling blades through choppy water we moved towards each night's resting place. Kevlar canoes cut through the waves with brash naivety. Less graceful were the fibreglass crafts as they stubbornly plowed forward propelled by the tenacity and strength of the women on board. The most regal of the canoes was the *Skookum Kalitan*, her elegant design perfected by the First Nations people of the Northwest Coast. From a single gigantic cedar log the canoe-makers carved and steamed these gracefully engineered craft, each coastal community developing its own individual design consistent with their needs. The *Skookum Kalitan* danced and frolicked in the open waves delighting in the strained efforts of her river born sisters. The contrast in the physical design of the canoes is striking; one engineered by the peoples on whose coastal waters we paddled and the other used by French Canadian voyagers to expand and dominate the fur trade on the rivers and in the great lakes to the east.

Paddling in the *Skookum Kalitan* was a privilege which I was fortunate to experience. The stroke was set by two women, one right, one left, gripping hand carved exquisitely painted paddles. The canoe was steered with the quiet proficiency of a man committed to embracing and sharing his knowledge of the history of a nation and its original peoples predating the 150 years of which many were celebrating. The existence of this history was felt in the early morning, its mist, being the ethereal presence of the Sechelt and Squamish peoples, rising from the waters they have traveled for centuries. Dipping, pulling, lifting our paddles as one we are lulled by the grace and gentleness of wood on water soon to be roused by the eagle stroke, one, two, three, paddle shafts beat on gunwales.

My journey from Egmont to West Vancouver through the unceded territory and on the waters of the Salish and Squamish went beyond the physical. I saw the coastal mountains, quiet waters, roiling seas, and pebbled beaches through new eyes. My sister's and my last paddle stroke of our Canada 150+ canoe journey was taken under the outstretched arms of the Welcome Figure in Ambleside Park. Like the *Skookum Kalitan*, it too, was constructed from a single old-growth cedar log. And fittingly, this gift from the Squamish Nation, marks K'aya'chtn, meaning gathering of ocean canoes, and is said to honour the knowledge, principles, and wisdom of the Squamish Nation's elders and to promote and encourage reverence for the land and for the people that dwell upon it. The Welcome Figure embodies the very essence of the brigade's mandate.