

Darwin on the Beach

From a teenager, **George Dyson** was drawn to Canada's west coast, to its wildness and to its water. This brought him to a life of designing and building baidarkas – the elegant Bering Sea Aleutian island's ancient skinboat forerunner of the kayak – out of space-age aluminum and pulp-mill fabric, bringing the Aleutian's design perfection to a wider North American audience. Then in the nineties a new wildness beckoned, the digital frontier, as Dyson wrote a definitive book on the emergence of the computer age, *Darwin Among the Machines*. In encompassing each, Dyson has found a path which resolves the embodied craft of ancient futures and the disembodied virtualities of the wild digital horizon.

From under European skies the North Pacific's Bering Sea is almost unimaginably remote. It extends from the western-most reaches of what today is USA's richest state, Alaska, to the eastern-most edge of Asia, the Siberian coast. Necklaced across this northerly circumpolar sea is a linear archipelago of tiny islands known as the Aleutians. They stretch over 1500 miles of water, each island 50 or 60 miles apart. On these islands small communities of indigenous people, the Aleuts, have made their home for thousands of years, probably it was the first stop on the great migration from Siberia that resulted in the prehistoric populating of the Americas. Up until the eighteenth century no European knew anything of the Aleuts, until in 1741 the Danish explorer Vitus Bering, in the service of the Russian crown, was astonished to find approaching their boat not only 'natives' but natives in two extraordinary boats:

'two fathoms long, two feet high, and two feet wide ... the frame is of sticks fastened together at both ends and spread apart from the crosspieces inside. On the outside this frame is covered with skin ... When the American has sat down in his boat and stretched out his legs ... he draws this hem together around his body and fastens it with the bowknot in order to prevent any water from

*getting in ... The American puts his right hand into the hole of the boat and, holding the paddle in the other hand, carries it thus because of its lightness on to the land anywhere he wants to and back from the land into the water ... With (the paddle) he ... propels his boat with great adroitness even among large waves.'*¹

What Bering and his crew were staring at were examples of the circumpolar tradition for sea lion skin boats, which had grown up on the Aleutian Islands and been refined over millennia into one of the closest fits between form and function known in the boat world. For Bering and the Russian colonists who came after him the boats proved a puzzle. Where did these strange objects come from? Why here in the Aleutians? How did a design of such seaworthy brilliance come to be?

The puzzle is such that different observers over the years have pointed to the Aleuts as being a species apart. They were, wrote one, 'an integral part of the boat'. Bering wasn't quite the first to encounter a baidarka though, one of his colleagues had seen these 'leather boats' nine years earlier. Although the Russian word 'baidarka' stuck, the name which has come down to us is Kayak, a word of Greenlandic origin. What Bering wasn't to know was that they were looking at the ancestral form of the kayak boating design which, two hundred and fifty years later, was destined to take over the world of small boats.

'I think,' says George Dyson, the baidarka builder who almost single-handedly has put the Aleutians on the West's boat map, 'it is very clear why the Aleutians were so fertile. You have this chain of islands that are close enough together so you can get from one to the other. It's like God created the Aleutians to evolve kayaks. If they are too far apart it's extremely difficult. If you put people on a big island like Australia they don't need boats, and the culture tends to degenerate. Culture flowers when you have competing cultures. I mean, you don't just have Venice; you have Venice and Florence viciously competing whilst cross-fertilising with each other. That's what happened with the Aleutians. All these people had to have kayaks. And they would occasionally go to war against their neighbour and occasionally intermarry. So society was really based on having better kayaks. The islands had big gaps, fifty or sixty miles. So you had to have a very good boat to get to the next place. The other important thing is that these islands comprise a linear shape, all having the same climate, with everything the same, and so you could get this very intense breeding ground of culture.'

Dyson, a youthful and fit-looking, fifty-two year old, has been involved in baidarka culture for several decades, long before the craze for consumer-kayaking swept both America and other parts of the Modern

All photos George Dyson



World, from Australia through to Europe. To some considerable extent, agrees Chris Cunningham, editor of *Sea Kayaker* magazine, Dyson was instrumental in creating the wave of interest, as well as riding it. If that wave was partial spawning ground for kayak culture, there is also a small coterie of baidarka luminaries intent on maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the baidarka. Today, Cunningham and Dyson are in accord about the fact that skin boats comprise up to only 10% of all kayaks built. Cunningham refers to the North American affection for skin boats as one which has not always sufficiently recognised where the design came from. 'For better or worse kayaking is akin to mountain biking, in that it completely ignores the more serious implications of going on water.' By contrast he is fulsome in his praise of Dyson, for always giving the

credit that is the Aleutians' right. Dyson himself acknowledges this. 'People are thankful to me for making it clear that they invented this kayak, which was a triumph of intellectual achievement. So much of the emphasis was on how "isn't it amazing that this thing floated", and I say, "This is really sophisticated, it wasn't an accident". It was very smart people thinking clearly about the problem.'

Today he lives in the small fishing town of Bellingham, near Seattle in Washington state, tucked up beside the Canadian border. Over the course of the last fifteen years he has developed a small baidarka boat-building business, his designs being an evolving adaptation on a form, which he is certain is itself the creature of evolutionary processes. The last twelve of those years have been at his workshop, a converted