

Factoids

Pierre Trudeau on Canoeing



"I would not know how to instill a taste for adventure in those who have not acquired it. (Anyway, who can ever prove the necessity for the gypsy life?) And yet there are people who suddenly tear themselves away from their comfortable existence and, using the energy of their bodies as an example to their brains, apply themselves to the discovery of unsuspected pleasures and places. I would like to point out to these people a type of labour from which they are certain to profit: an expedition by canoe.

What sets a canoeing expedition apart is that it purifies you more rapidly and inescapably than any other. Travel a thousand miles by train and you are a brute; pedal five hundred on a bicycle and you remain basically a bourgeois; paddle a hundred in a canoe and you are already a child of nature."

— Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Patriot, Paddler, Prime Minister of Canada for 15 years

CANADIANS LOVE A CANOE



Canoedling in the evening, reads the caption on this old postcard, part of a collection of images on romance and the canoe included in a temporary exhibit at the Canadian Canoe Museum in 2013. Photo courtesy of the Canadian Canoe Museum

The quote: "A Canadian is somebody who knows how to make love in a canoe," was attributed to author Pierre Berton in 1973.

Berton was fairly certain he never uttered this oft-cited line about a highly specialized Canuck skill. But, says his son Paul, editor-in-chief of the *Hamilton Spectator*, his late father thought "it was a good quote and he was happy to take credit if people kept insisting."

So, no, dear newcomer to Canada, you will not be required to demonstrate this ability at your citizenship ceremony, nor is there any mention in the oath of promising to make sexy time in the most Canadian of vessels.

But the act itself, and why this line endures, is worthy of examination.

The search for answers takes us to the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough, which in 2014 launched a temporary exhibit on romance and the canoe. It included a trove of old photos and postcards depicting courtship involving the canoe. That was a thing. To wit, vessels kitted out with record players and without middle thwarts.

"In the 1910s, '20s, '30s and even beyond, the canoe was a serious courting device," says James Raffan, former museum staffer, author

of 18 books and perhaps our country's most passionate lover of the canoe. (He did once plan to do it in a canoe on a creek near Love, Sask., but discovered the creek to be dry.)

In the spring of 2017, Raffan, 63, took part in a 10-day canoe trip from Ottawa to Kingston, a museum initiative and part of Canada 150 that involved around 100 paddlers from First Nations, Inuit and other diverse communities.

Each paddler came with a question about the future of Canada they wished to explore. As they paddled through rain and, yes, snow, the questions were discussed.

"I cried more tears and saw more genuine emotion flood to the surface on this journey than I expected and had anything to do with in a long, long time," Raffan says. "People care deeply about Canada."

Perhaps this is the true love the canoe, as spiritual conduit, brings Canadians.

It is part of our psyche, a myth, a "kind of archetype of a way of relating to each other," Raffan says.

"I think the canoe has beauty and functionality but I think it also does take us to a place in our collective imagination - and when I say

us, I'm talking about First Nations, Inuit, new Canadians. I think we were making love, not biblical, but in the most wholesome and nutritious sense, to each other, to the landscape, to the water, to the country in thinking about its future with the canoe."

That said, dear reader, if you are going to have actual sex in a canoe, we will offer some practical advice.

Raffan suggests a "rattin'" canoe, a short beamy boat favoured by trappers and hunters. "You can probably stand in them and fire both barrels of a 12-gauge at once and still be totally solid in that," he says.

If you really want to be a true Canadian, says Raffan, you must do it in a wooden or a canvas and wooden vessel.

However, they tend to be "built for beauty, speed, as well as some of the other considerations" that fail to contemplate the physics of lovemaking.

"So what you gain in esthetics you might lose in functionality of the, ahhh ... um," says Raffan, searching for and ultimately abandoning an attempt to find words suitable for print.

But he does have a way with words, and deserves the final one, on our love with the canoe.

"I will say, without betraying any confidences, that to lie in the bottom of a canoe on a starlit night is almost a religious experience," he says.

"To be able to see a portrait of time immortal in the sky and to feel the earth turning and to be supported in that kind of minimal space between the underworld and the overworld. And to be conscious of north, south, east and west on the horizontal plane and, you know, that's only by yourself.

"If you do it with somebody else, it gets way better."

Excerpted from an article by Jim Rankin published in the Toronto Star in July, 2017.

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