

# Mystic Revelations, Rowing Boats, and Making a Decent Oar

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## Small Talk, Revelations, and Boats

When I first went to Mystic Seaport for the Small Craft Workshop in 1988, it was just the right time. I had made it through the grammar school of the lofted line and the rolling gain, and I had recently graduated from the high school of the handsome, capable boat. I felt ready to look my peer in the eye and discuss the fine points of traditional small craft. What I found was a university of insane purity and revelation. It was Christmas, and I was eight years old again. Yes, Virginia, there really is a John Gardner, and although these things rarely work out, he was *exactly* John Gardner.

Strangely, Pete Culler was there. Although he's been gone for ten years, his presence was so strongly felt that it was as if he were perpetually just at the other end of the pavilion. Several of his boats, made by his own hand, were there. I had always admired Pete Culler's work but was frankly a little mystified by the Culler cult. It took no time at all studying, touching, and absorbing what I could of these boats to regain some needed humility and acquire a sense of grief at his early passing. The weekend was filled with surprise and revelation, and I came away with a year's thought, study, and work ahead of me.

In 1989, Mystic was as full of joy as before. Again, it was the people with their depth and breadth, in a wonderful setting, that was so tremendously enriching. I came away filled with delight and, deep inside me, a new revelation. And although this revelation took several months to surface, there was a new hero to accompany it.

That hero is Lois Darling. The revelation is in her model of Ratty's boat from *The Wind in the Willows*. That's it. Just Lois, Mole, Ratty, and the boat. It's like this. For the past few years I had been increasingly dissatisfied with the rowboat's obscurity. I like rowboats a lot. I live, breathe, and dream rowboats. Sailboats are okay, you can hitch a free ride, and if you insist on being the one to steer, you can stave off boredom playing with the lines and twiddling the tiller while you wait to be terrorized. Still it gets old in a hurry. Sure, in kayaks you can face forward. You're also firmly cocooned to the waist in a tippy little sliver with the only thing separating you from disaster being survival tricks. Canoes are just as bad. You kneel (!) while holding a short oar in your hands and try to ply it in such a fashion as to make the boat go straight. If you want to talk to your companion, you talk to the back of her head. Some conviviality. Racing shells are probably the worst of the bunch. They are so juiced up on testosterone that the only pleasure left is the hope of winning.

I knew all this, as well as the wonder and joy of pleasure rowing, within days of first picking up John Gardner's *Building Classic Small Craft*. Pete Culler's *Boats, Oars and Rowing* burned pleasure rowing into my core. Why then do all of these other boats have legions of supporters, all buying boats, magazines, and countless dollars' worth of frippery while the rowboat anguishes?

The answer is clarity of purpose. I think now that we have to suspend all we know about boats, oars, and rowing

and concentrate on one thing: making rowing as pleasurable as it is for Ratty and Mole. I'll say it, "simply messing about" in Ratty's boat.

To do this—to make the joy of rowing understandable to others besides the hard-core believers—we have to identify all of the things that make rowing less fun than the prospective rower thought it would be. And then we get rid of them. I've listed some places to start:

1. Drag. A rowboat should be long and slim and elegant. It should glide through the water with minimum effort and be really capable of going places. No more short, fat rowboats.

2. Weight. Weight not only slows a boat down, it also keeps it from getting to the water in the first place. Most women can regularly lift about 35 pounds onto a car without alarm. If a couple expects to use a boat, it better not weigh more than 70 pounds.

3. Tippiness. The boat must be steady enough that novices can relax and not have to be on top of it all of the time. Commercial canoes are this steady.

4. Lack of foot braces. Braces *are* a pain to fit, but until you get the knack of digging your toenails through the varnish, they are a big help.

5. Neck-crooking. Maintaining a course on a winding river or in a breeze can be aggravating especially since the boats that are the easiest to row and the most maneuverable can also be the most difficult to keep on course. Ratty had the answer all the time. I've made a resolution that all of the rowboats going out of my shop from now on will have a rudder, yoke, and tiller lines as