**Messing About in Small Boats**

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I’m not sure if I’m a real sailor. I love the sea above all things, and am not happy to be away from it. But I want to be embraced by the water, not suspended above it, and so big boats aren’t my thing. Small dinghies suit me better. Ocean yachts, especially when skippered by someone else, don’t offer the same attraction. They make me feel as if I am combatting the sea, not at one with it.

I grew up on the Caribbean Sea and the Indian Ocean, and as a young man spent some years on the east coast of Australia. All places with plenty of sun, clear water, sandy beaches, rock pools and rollicking surf. Now I live in London and whenever I can I decamp to our weekend house fifty miles north-east on the Essex coast. The Blackwater estuary, as its name suggests, offers a different kind of sea. Mudbanks, lugworms, curlews, big skies and fast-flowing tides. In my youth, I would have scorned the bleak estuaries of East Anglia. Now I have learned to see beyond the easy pleasures of sunny beaches, and have come to enjoy the Essex coast just as much.

I have been able to swim ever since I can remember. When I was four my family moved to Port of Spain in Trinidad. What I recall best are the beaches. Nearest to the city was Macquaripe beach, a sheltered bay deemed appropriate for young children. But I far preferred Maracas beach, a bit further away through the mountains. This faced out to the Atlantic and enjoyed lively surf. Much more fun. Many years later I returned to Trinidad and made a point of revisiting Maracas. It was just as I remembered it, with waves, crowds, and Bake-and-Shark stands selling hot fried marinated shark in flatbread.

We would also go to the American naval base at Chaguaramas on the north west corner of the island. This had been leased to the USA during the war under the “destroyers for bases agreement” and by 1951 it featured a full-scale American country club. We were honorary members, courtesy of my father’s status as a colonial civil servant. I still have the scar on my foot from when I dropped a coke bottle next to the pool and stood on the broken glass. On a good day you could see Venezuela across the Bocas del Dragón. There was a bathing raft moored some thirty or so yards off the beach. I can remember the first time I swam out and joined my mother on it.

After three years we returned to London, but following tropical Trinidad I don’t think my parents were inclined to stay in England long. In 1956 we moved to Durban, South Africa, and remained there for twelve years. At first we lived in a village south of the city, with a house fronting on to the beach. Later we moved into Durban itself, on the Berea, with views over the harbour and the city beaches. It was a pity not to be right on the beach any more, but I could hitch a ride down the hill and be there in ten minutes.

Sailing didn’t feature in my life then. Surfing was the thing. Not board surfing, but body surfing. In the 1950s and early 60s surf boards were still unwieldy constructions made of balsa wood and fibre glass. They weren’t unknown, but they were few and far between. So we managed without. The trick was to start swimming with a wave as it was breaking and let the release of its energy sweep your rigid body forward like a board. There was a knack to it, but once you had the wave you could stay with it, and in good conditions could manoeuvre around the wave’s face while riding it. We called it “catching slides”.

The focus of the Durban seafront was North Beach, confined between two rubble groynes extending out to sea. We’d jump into “the wash” next to the southern groyne and be swept 100 yards out, to the point where the Indian Ocean waves were breaking. The aim was to catch one all the way back on to the beach. You needed the right conditions. Six-foot waves were good for me, but some of the burlier body-surfers wouldn’t bother to get in the water until they were twice that size.

Sadly, body-surfing is now largely a lost art. Pop-out surf and boogie boards have made it obsolete, and it is preserved only by beach lifesavers who compete in surf swimming races. It’s a pity. There’s something uniquely satisfying about harnessing a wave’s power with no aids beyond your body itself. I still try to do it whenever I can.

So sailing played little part in my youth. A friend belonged to one of the yacht clubs in Durban’s expansive harbour, and he took me out in his dinghy once. But there was no wind and we ended up paddling. Another friend’s rich dentist father was proud of his forty-foot sloop and took some of us for a jaunt up and down the coast. I found it tiresome and wanted to get back to the beach.

The first seeds weren’t really sown until some twenty years later, when I was married and back in England. My wife Rose was working on a women’s magazine and a flotilla firm offered a free week’s sailing cruise round the Saronic Gulf near Athens in return for a possible write-up. We invited a couple of friends to join us. While Rose had sailed when younger, the rest of us had no real background, but we were all ready to have a go.

Luckily the boats in the flotilla were at the more pedestrian end of the spectrum from motor cruisers to sailing yachts. This became apparent the first time we tried to take the boat through the wind. It simply lost speed and missed stays. We were determined to sail rather than motor, so we kept trying, but with no success. We couldn’t work out what we were doing wrong. Dilly, the least experienced of us, watched what we were doing for a while, and then asked why we didn’t just turn away from the wind and gybe round to the other tack. That worked, of course, not that it had occurred to the rest of us, and henceforth was known as “Dilly’s manoeuvre”. It was only some years later that I learned that “wearing ship” was historically a standard technique for unwieldy square-riggers.

The cruise was great fun, but sailing opportunities as such were limited. Probably just as well given how little prepared we were. When we asked the others in our little fleet what they did about tacking they explained they just turned the engine on for a bit. They couldn’t see the point of our sailing purism.

In time I learned to sail properly. It happened in fits and starts. I had become open to the idea, but in London opportunities were rare. A first stage was learning to windsurf. It looked like fun, and I used to borrow or hire boards when I was on holiday. My initial plan was to acquire the technique by trial and error. This didn’t prove entirely straightforward. I found out what happens if you keep falling off in an offshore wind. Perhaps I’d still be experimenting if I hadn’t overheard a teacher explaining to his class that you can steer by moving the sail forward or back.

I can still remember the feeling when I finally got the hang of it. I was on a short package holiday on a not particularly pleasant Greek island. A few tavernas around a small working port in a bay. Suddenly I wasn’t stuck any more. I could spread my wings and fly—to the other side of the bay, in and about the moored boats, around the island beyond them. It was a blessed release. The sea became a highway, not a barrier. This remains a large part of the joy of sailing for me. There are no boundaries on the open water. A boat with a sail will take you wherever you want to go.

The next stage of my sailing career took place in West Cork. Rose has a family of Irish cousins, and ever since she was ten they had adopted her every summer and taken her on holiday to Schull, a small fishing town on the south-west corner of Ireland. She and they have continued the tradition ever since, and when I married Rose more than two decades later, I was generously included in the regular summer holiday.

I can’t say I liked it at first. Not at all. It couldn’t have been more different from the beaches of my youth. Grey skies, scudding clouds, frequent rain. The area was traditional and avoided by tourists. This was long before the Irish economic tiger. No restaurants, no delicatessens, no chi-chi shops. No avocadoes. There were plenty of pubs, over a dozen in the small town, but they too were old-school. Murphy’s Stout or Smithwick’s Ale.

The cousins did have a thirty-foot sloop, but outings were complicated. First everybody—and the numbers were growing with the generations—had to wake up. Eventually all would gather for a long lunch. When that was done it depended on the weather. On the odd occasions that it wasn’t raining, a party might finally set off in the boat in the late afternoon. Even then I didn’t specially enjoy it. It was good to be on the water, but it had taken hours to get there, and my only job once we were finally afloat was to keep out of the way and not get tangled up in anything.

For some years I suffered. Rose was tolerant, and said she wouldn’t mind if I didn’t come. But I didn’t want to go on holiday on my own. So instead I sulked. I’m not proud of it. Luckily a London friend who grew up near Schull was able to help me. When I explained I couldn’t find anything to like about the place, he explained, “You’re doing it all wrong. You have to ignore the weather. It changes every half hour. It might start raining, but it will stop soon enough. Don’t let it keep you inside.” His advice altered everything. I started exploring and didn’t let the weather deflect me. The area couldn’t be more beautiful. Wild scenery, ruined castles, ragged coastlines. My feelings for the place quickly turned around.

And then there was the sea. Schull had a small sailing hire centre. I started with their windsurfers but I was soon taking out a classic Laser. It was straightforward enough, now that I could windsurf, and it let me range further. Schull is on the edge of Roaringwater Bay, the great expanse of islands facing the Atlantic at Ireland’s south-west tip. Schull harbour itself is a mile square. Outside the harbour the mainland faces across a sound to the once-farmed but now-abandoned Goat Island, Long Island, Castle Island, and Horse Island. Beyond that, and past the Carthy Islands, is another line of three islands—West, Middle and East Calf—and then finally, five miles out to sea, the still-inhabited Cape Clear Island. (I have an old admiralty chart framed on my living room wall in London.)

Within a couple of years I knew those waters backwards. I can’t believe there’s a better place for sailing anywhere. Past one island and on to the next, through huge flocks of bobbing guillemots, with dolphins, seals, diving gannets and even the occasional whale. In my little Laser I felt close to the marine creatures. In line with my new policy, I’d go out in all weathers, storms aside, and sometimes returned to shore with chattering teeth and blue with cold. But mostly the weather changed for the better soon enough, and in any case it was worth it to be out on the water.

The sailing centre also had a Skipper for hire. These are 14-foot moulded plastic dinghies, with a gaff-rigged main and a small jib and plenty of comfortable seating. I’ve never met a sailor who viewed them with anything but scorn. But they are a clever design, and once we had children they were a boon for us. From pretty much the time our two children could walk, we would pack up a lunch and set off on a family voyage to some Roaringwater island in our Skipper. The children loved it. An element of adventure and they learned the basics of sailing. The Skipper would bump along perfectly well across the wind, even if it couldn’t point up very high. Not perhaps the raciest of vessels, but perfect for our purposes.

Holiday sailing was all very well, but it was only for a couple of weeks a year. This changed once I came to know about the Blackwater estuary. We live in Kentish Town in north London. One summer, about twenty years ago, I asked a friend if he was going away at all. “We’ve rented a place on an island in Essex for a couple of weeks” he said. “Don’t be silly”, I said, “How can Essex have an island *in it*? Essex is made of land.” He didn’t bother to argue with me. “Just come and spend a day with us. Simply follow the directions I give you, and don’t be late for lunch.”

So I did what I was told. It was an easy enough drive from home, through the outskirts of London and some pleasant countryside. We’d been told ninety minutes or so, but when that was up there was still no sign of any water, let alone an island. And then the little road we were on went onto the top of a dyke—and I immediately knew I’d found somewhere that was going to be important to me.

What we could see was a large expanse of exposed sea bottom, across which a rock-paved causeway snaked for a mile to an island. This was Osea Island and, as we soon discovered, the causeway dates from Roman times and is only uncovered for four hours each low tide. (Thus the insistence “Don’t be late for lunch”.) The island itself is about two miles long and half a mile wide. It was once farmed, but by then was owned by a man who lived in the big “manor house” and rented out the dozen-odd other properties scattered around the island. There were dirt roads, no shops, and any number of places for children to get lost in.

I didn’t hesitate. My first thought was that I wanted to buy something on the island. It turned out that nothing was for sale, but we soon arranged to take a cottage on a long-term lease. Nearly all the other tenants were people like us with young children, renting their cottages on an indefinite basis. (Our original friends had borrowed their holiday place from one of the permanent tenants.) We started spending every weekend and most holidays there. Our diaries came to be ruled by the tides. We arranged our lives around the availability of the causeway. When we arrived for the weekend, the children would jump out of the car and disappear. We would only see them again when a marauding posse of dirt-streaked youngsters appeared in search of food.

Osea Island is in the middle of the “Blackwater River”. This is the next big inlet twenty miles north of the Thames estuary on the east coast of England. It is about ten miles long, running from the coast to the historic port town of Maldon at its neck, and on average two miles wide. In fact the Blackwater River is not a river at all, despite its name. Technically it is a “ria”, an expanse of water created by global sea levels rising and flooding a historic river valley. Some smaller rivers do empty into the Blackwater, but none of them bear that name. (To be honest, “rias” puzzle me. Won’t rising sea levels bring some extra sea into every river mouth? I once thought I had a good analysis of the difference between rias and rivers, but, when I explained it to my departmental colleague David Owens, he pointed out that my theory implied that there are no rivers.)

When we first arrived on Osea Island, there were a few small boats about. It was a very communal set-up, and we were free to borrow each other’s vessels (subject only to the rule that if something broke you had to get it fixed, however ready to break it was). But soon enough we acquired a small fleet of our own. We started with a small inflatable “rubber duck” plus outboard, followed by a Topper dinghy for the children, then a couple of classic Lasers, two more Toppers, a rowing boat, and finally a Skipper like the one from Ireland for family outings.

As with most rias, the Blackwater is rich with inlets off the main body of water. Many lead to villages or small towns. There are other islands, some inhabited, some not. We would often set off in motley flotillas, aiming to rendezvous at some agreed destination. Ice creams for the children and beers for the grown-ups. The children soon became confident sailors in their own right.

The Blackwater has a lot of tide. The range is often over 5 metres. I became very interested in tidal rhythms. I was particularly struck by the way that the spring high tides at any given location always fall at about the same time of day. In Osea that was around 1430. This was something to be grateful for, because tides advance much more slowly around springs than neaps (maybe by 30 mins a day rather than 90 mins), and so our highs tended to stick around at midday and our lows around dawn and dusk. Since a lot of the estuary’s inlets turned into sandbanks at low tide, that suited us very well. (In Burnham Overy Snaithe, a hundred miles north, where some friends have a place in Norfolk, it’s the other way around, with spring lows at midday—so they suffer with lows as the dominant daytime tide.)

(If you’re wondering why spring highs are always at the same time at any given place, there’s an elegant explanation. Springs occur when the crest of the tidal wave pulled by the moon coincides with the crest of the sun’s wave. And the latter arrives as regularly as clockwork each day—as it happens, at 1430 at Osea. So spring highs there have to be around that time. As to the tides advancing more at springs than neaps, that’s simply due to the mathematical fact that the period of the resultant of two waves is less when they reinforce than when they counterbalance.)

Sailors in the Blackwater need to watch out for the tide. At springs it can race at up to three knots. The children soon found out that “tide and wind in the same direction” was a danger sign. If you got downwind and downsteam of where you wanted to go, you could be in trouble. But we all learned fast from experience. We made mistakes, but dry land was never too far away, and there were normally plenty of friendly boats to hand.

After we’d been on Osea for about five years, the owner sold the island and we all had to leave. It was a wrench, but a lot of the tenants bought houses on the Blackwater mainland instead. We ourselves, along with our boats, found a house in Bradwell Waterside, a hamlet near the mouth of the estuary on the south side. Twenty years later, it still suits us perfectly. Our fleet’s been augmented by a twenty-foot motor boat in the nearby marina, and the tubby old Skipper has been replaced by a Wayfarer. But we still have all our small dinghies and can launch them from the village slipway 100 yards away.

I sail as much as ever. The children are now grown up, and only join me occasionally, but from April to October I go out pretty much every day. Sometimes it is just a short outing across to the north side of the estuary to explore the wetlands in Tollesbury Sound or West Mersey Quarters. But on other days, depending on the winds and tides, I will sail the ten miles up the estuary to Maldon and back, or go as far in the other direction to Brightlingsea and the mouth of the River Colne.

Many of my friends, even those who are sailors themselves, ask me what I get out of it. I never know how to answer them. I’m reminded of William Paley, the great theological advocate of the argument from design, who said, about the not dissimilar pastime of fishing:

“I never yet met with a sportsman, who could tell me in what the sport consisted: who could resolve it into its principle, and state that principle. I have been a great follower of fishing myself, and in its cheerful solitude have passed some of the happiest hours of a sufficiently happy life; but, to this moment, I could never trace out the source of the pleasure which it afforded me” (*Natural Theology* chapter 26).

That’s just how I feel about sailing. It’s a big part of my life. I’d be far poorer without it. Yet the pleasure is somehow ineffable. If someone asks me what’s so good about it, I don’t know what to say.

It’s certainly not to do with the boats themselves. I have sailing friends for whom the actual sailing is little more than an excuse to work on their boats. They are far happier in the workshop than on the water, and even when they do go out often seem to be counting the minutes till they can get back to fixing the new faults that have been exposed. That’s not me at all. I want my boats to be seaworthy, of course, and in the interests of efficiency have learned how to fibreglass and rivet and so on. But I take no special pleasure in it. The sooner the faults are fixed, the sooner I can be back on the water.

For other sailing friends, there’s no point in sailing if you aren’t racing. Again, that’s not what gets me going. I’ve done my share of racing, both in dinghies and in keelboats, and have liked it well enough. But somehow it is all too rushed, too urgent. I want my sailing to be restful, not exciting. In truth I am glad that I didn’t start my sailing with competitive racing, nor did my children. I’ve met quite a few people who associate sailing with memories of childhood stress and being forced to go out in miserable weather. Now they are grown up they’d sooner eat glass than sail for fun. It’s sad how their initial experience of sailing has soured them to its pleasures.

And then there are those sailors who only want to be in big keelboats. They think of dinghies as something children learn to sail in, before they graduate to proper ocean-going vessels. In my view, they are missing out too. As I said at the beginning of this essay, bigger keelboats leave me feeling separated from the sea, rather than part of it. We’ve on occasion hired proper cruising yachts, once I was able to sail properly, for family holidays in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. They have been great times, and I can see the attraction of covering substantial amounts of ocean. But, even if we put to one side the discomforts of cramped quarters for days on end, the sailing itself has never really grabbed me.

Perhaps the difference lies in the way big boats are more cumbrous and forgiving. By comparison, my dinghies are skittish, light, and all too easy to capsize. They demand complete attention. Sailing them might not be stressful, but it does require total absorption. You cannot turn your mind for a moment from balancing the gusts and keeping an even keel through the waves. Any slip and you’re likely to be upside-down in the water.

But at the same time this focus unites you with the sea. When I’m out in my Wayfarer or Laser, the demands of sailing my boat bring with them an intense awareness of my environment. The race of the tide. The patch of seaweed in my path. A shift in the wind. The cormorant or grebe that dives as I approach. The occasional seal or dolphin whose curiosity I attract. My mind discards all extraneous thoughts and engages entirely with my immediate watery surroundings. I become part of an older world that was there before humans came to the Blackwater.

And this, I think, might give us an answer to Paley’s question, if not for fishing, at least for my sailing. Paley himself, as you might expect, thought the pleasures of fishing were intimations of immortality, a sign that providence has created a natural world to console and delight us. I don’t embrace Paley’s metaphysics of divinity, but the underlying sentiment rings true to me. When I am sailing, I’m united with a natural environment that owes nothing to the advance of humanity. I’m not sure I’d go so far as to say that when I am on the water I transcend the chains of civilization and revert to a more noble state. But it does sometimes feel like that.