

300+ Kilometers in Fiordland

The following account of a trip in Fiordland has been reproduced and edited from the Palmerston North Canoe Club newsletters of March-May 1986. The trip was undertaken by Eric & Betty Terzaghi in a Quality Kayak Touring double kayak, Chrissie Williams and Eric van Toor both in Nordkapps.

The Land Rover got loaded up with a mountain of gear and food and headed off South on Christmas Day, leaving Palmerston North at midday, to arrive at Christchurch at 1 am. By pre-arrangement we had to load onto the Fiordland Travel launch at Manapouri 7 am the very next day - we made it'. After a nice launch trip, a tour of the Manapouri hydro and a scenic bus trip over the Wilmot Pass we were deposited on the wharf at Deep Cove in a gentle drizzle and a cloud of sandflies. How on earth was all that stuff - food and gear for two weeks of civilised camping for four- going to fit into two Nordkapps and one double kayak? Even after Eric had surreptitiously eliminated some of the excess - liquid refreshment and plum puddings for example, the pile was huge, but to our disbelief it all disappeared and the waterline was nowhere near our avels as we had feared it might be. We even had room to spare so Eric was roundly denounced by all (including Eric himself) for his hasty actions.

The first day's objective was a possible campsite at the intersection of Doubtful Sound and Crooked Arm. We reached that later in the afternoon and as there was plenty of daylight left and no one was particularly tired, we pressed on to the top end of Crooked Arm, setting a pattern to be maintained for the entire trip of 30 to 40 km per day with hourly rest/drink/scrog stops. Camp was set up in the increasingly heavy rain. A huge but light nylon fly, actually a retired car-cover turned out to be the most useful single item of gear we had brought. There followed a 36 hour involving flooded rivers ("Eric, Betty! Time to get up - the river is coming through camp!"), overland route finding in a misty Fiordland forest ("that's funny, the sun should be on the other side!") and numerous portages. By the evening of the third day the indignities of the second day had become a communal joke but we had reached the entrance to Dagg Sound - poised for the crux of the whole trip - 30km of open ocean with only one landing spot part way along the coast and described in such uninviting terms by Paul Caffyn that we were not interested in trying that on. Camp was a small island with a stream on both sides covered with huge wild fushias, each festooned with clumps of mosses supporting miniature orchid gardens - exquisite. The landing, the worst part of sea canoeing, looked bad, as we entered the cove a fairly big swell was running in although we were around a bit of a corner from the open sea which would have provided some shelter from the sea. There was a dumping beach break but at one corner the stream had cut a deep channel and by waiting out a set of waves we could even cneak into a sheltered lagoon, at high tide, without a breaking wave.

Up at 5 am for the morning weather schedule from Awarua Radio - brilliant sky and the barometer at the highest it has been and a good forecast for the day. Right, go for it! Big breakfast, pack the boats with the scrog and juice handy and we are off. Out of the protection of our little cove the swell increased to maybe 2m and somewhat to our dismay it was breaking a fair way out from the southern headland of Dagg Sound - Towing Head. We found that to keep clear of both the odd reef break, and more importantly, the confused seas of the main swell bouncing back from the cliffs, we had to keep well off shore - up to a kilometer at times. We kept trying to guess which point in the hazy distance was the half-way point - Coal Beach - and which was the entrance to Breaksea Sound - our destination. Halfway along this coast, as Coal beach came into sight, Chrissie started slowing down and began to feed the fish. Administration of Marzine only made things worse with resulting hallucinations and blanking out. Towing and careful monitoring was called for, and after four hours of hard work we were poised for a landing on a moderately protected but stony beach on Breaksea Island. As Eric disappeared around a corner in his Nordkapp our adrenalin shot sky-high as we were suddenly surrounded by black fins cutting the water, but almost a quickly we realised that they were only seals. Rounding the corner there was the

Nordkapp, beached, and Eric leaping about trying to avoid a large bull seal whose sun bath had been rudely disturbed and wanted only to get into the sea - fast. We slowly realised that there were hundreds of them laying and swimming about, but they somewhat grudgingly shifted over and allowed us space to stretch out in the sun, and recover from the six hours of fairly strenuous effort. The many young animals provided almost non-stop entertainment for the afternoon, with their curiosity about the boats, their make-believe fights among themselves, and their intentional or accidental launches off a nearby steeply inclined rock slab.

Another half hour paddle brought us to Disappointment Cove, with a good sandy beach, on Resolution Island. Though wide open to the North-west (we were expecting a change in the wind to the North-west which would pin us down) it was the only place within miles that was not vertical. Sure enough, by morning beautiful, big, and perfectly formed 'tube' rollers were breaking on the beach backed up by a gale of wind and rain. There followed the one and only 'pit' day of the whole trip, keeping the fire going, reading the Begg's brothers book on Dusky Sound, and contemplating the delights of the coming New Year's Eve dinner - peanuts and port, a big spicy kedgereee followed by a steamed pudding and sauce.

New Year's day brought sufficiently diminished winds that we could get out of our trap, but only just, and slip into Acheron Passage where the wind was at our backs. The next 18kms were covered in less than two hours paddling time, surfing much of the way with brief stops to check out potential campsites on the northern side of the entrance to Wetjacket Arm (very good) and to chat with the first people we had so far seen - a group of four in an inflatable dinghy cruising around Dusky. At the southern end the Passage narrows, the wind strengthened and we were overtaken by a big fast fog bank and felt literally flushed out into the calm of Dusky Sound. Time for a lunch stop. We found a big rock shared by a nesting gull and the ever present oyster-catcher family. As it was pouring down the big blue fly was spread out and we all crawled under, along with the lunch box - a bizzarre sight for any passing boat. An afternoon paddle brought us to Cascade Cove from where sealers operated over 100 years ago - all that remained were lines of rock on the beach where they had cleared out slipways for their boats and peculiar hollowed out places underneath living trees. The very grotty Park hut was used for cooking only and fairly level places for the tents were found with difficulty nearby.

After packing up the next morning we set off in a gentle rain to find Pickersgill Harbour, the place where Cook had spent five weeks for rest and recreation but mainly for careful astronomical observations in order to establish the precise location of New Zealand. The spot, marked with a bronze plaque (recent) is a lovely natural nook just large enough to accommodate a small ship allowing mooring lines to go out on both sides to shore. The Park Board has provided a board walkway up to the top of Astronomer's Hill - all that remains of the clearing is an area of vegetation that is somewhat different than adjacent areas.

By now, typically, the sun was poking through so it was time for a nice scrog and juice stop on the rocks. Since the hour was still early and our plans not overly ambitious it was time to try a bit of fishing. A small spinner towed very near the shore brought up a small fish whose head baited a line and yielded a bigger one. The head of the latter in turn brought up from the deep a large blue cod which required three of us, balancing in the kayaks, to murder. We decided that the next step up might not have ended in our favour, so we called it quits at that stage as we had plenty for a meal anyway. Onto Luncheon Cove on Anchor Island - not only was this a known cray-boat anchoring spot (we hoped to be able to hitch a ride at least part of the way back up the coast to avoid the drama of the south bound passage) but it is also the site of the first european house and oceangoing ship to be built in New Zealand. The general area of the cove is well protected by Many islands - the geographer obviously gave up in despair at naming all these islands, but it is a canoeists dream. Many tiny passages among exquisite little islands, many draped with sunning seals. Indeed, on a subsequent excursion a little cove was found which ended in a cave containing many baby seals well guarded by adults who brooked no nonsense - obviously a seal creche.

Upon rounding the headland of Luncheon Cove we wncountered a white-haired gentleman in a dinghy. "You have come from where in those tiny wee boats? I would not go out to sea in one of those." he said. Thus our credentials were established and there began a very helpful association with this gang of fishermen. Four hours later, after a big lunch,

called "Just a cuppa", lots of talk and a vague indication that they might be going up the coast away in a few days time, we were on our way with only 25km to go before the next campsite towards Supper Cove. Towards 9pm with an hour of daylight still to go we found Sportsman's Cove, a big inlet with a tiny entrance. Lovely spot, but the only level spot to camp that we could find in the fading light was just at the high tide mark. But it was Spring tides we were having but it would not be until around 5 am the next morning before it would get us, so we settled in after a good feed of the fish caught earlier. 4.30 am Betty rolled over and found herself eyeball to eyeball with sea level. "Eric, Eric and Chrissie! Time to get up - Quick!" As it was not raining Eric and Betty retired to sheltered nooks in the bush and went back to sleep, Chrissie and Eric hung their tent up, had a brew up while the tide came up and went down, and then retired again until a civilised hour arrived.

After some fruitless diving for scallops reputed to reside in Sportsman's Cove, a leisurely paddle brought us to Supper Cove, at the head of Dusky Sound. We found a boat-house at water level for storing the canoes and hanging out wet tents and gear, and a pleasant hut occupied by a very mixed and cheerful group of trampers - Swiss, Scottish, Kiwis, Americans. The crew from the inflatable were also there awaiting a lift out by helicopter. One of this group turned out to be Leslie Hadley who had served as Paul Caffyn's support crew for his circumnavigation of Australia and Japan, so there was much to talk about. The following day was wet with a steady drizzle and so a day of bush walking rather than paddling or enjoying the slightly dubious benefits of a crowded hut. The international flavour of the clientele, however, made up for the discomforts of the population explosion.

With 40km to go to get back to Luncheon Cove, from where we hoped to catch a ride part way back up the coast, we made an early start. A bit of time was spent fishing and collecting mussels for tea, but it was mostly just a long slog, although the non-stop sunshine was most welcome. Mid-afternoon saw us round the point into Luncheon Cove and to our relief found the fishermen, their boat decorated with floats freshly painted with the latest fluorescent colours. We were welcomed back like old friends, and over our (feeble) protests, were invited in for hot showers, a combined dinner effort (our mussels weren't much of a show against their cray legs and huge proper steaks). Between courses we had to take the 'car' (outboard fishing boat) out to have a sunset view of Five Finger Peninsula - truly spectacular. Then to bed wherever a spare soft spot could be found. Eric and Chrissie ended up in the accommodation on board 'Sea Shag' - a crawl hole with mattresses underneath the wheelhouse, and their sleeping bags reeked of fish for the remainder of the trip.

The agenda for the next day, we discovered, was not a trip up the coast, but rather a dim preview of what the trip up the coast held in store. 'Sea Shag' had been holed on the last trip and required patching. A simple dry dock (two submerged logs) were arranged in precisely the spot where the first European ship built in New Zealand was launched, and 'Sea Shag' was parked there at high tide. At low tide she was left high and dry, revealing a gash down the bottom of her aluminum hull. With patches cut from baking tins, silicon seal and pop-rivets, she was as good as new - we hoped. The rest of the day passed quickly, between pulling nets for the bait fish, pulling a long line for dinner, visiting their new moorage (so we would be able to find them next time we were down!) baking a birthday cake for Dibbo (chief fisherman) and generally getting organised for a 4am departure.

4am came very quickly, particularly as we hadn't gotten to bed until midnight. A leisurely breakfast, and then one of the big V-8 diesels wouldn't start. There ensued a two hour semi-comedy routine of changing starter motors, wires and a few quiet curses, which finally brought the roaring to life of the engine, and we were off. There followed about fifteen hours which are a blur of 230 lifted craypots, the 37 foot 'Sea Shag' darting in and out among the rocks, lifting and falling several meters at regular intervals, going around in tight circles in order to stay in one spot while the pot was lifted, emptied, rebaited and dropped again. Fixing cups and cups of coffee and milo, making sandwiches, baiting pots with stinking fish-heads, constant exhaust fumes, untangling and laying out a very long set net for bait for the next day - etc. With the very last glimmer of light we dropped overboard into the kayaks half a kilometer off the beach of our protected cove at the entrance to Dagg Sound - along with a small bag of crays (for tea). The surf in the almost complete darkness was daunting, but we knew from before that we could sneak in on the right side up a deep stream channel and miss the worst of it.

Thompson Sound
Colonial Head

Secretary Island

South West Point
Doubtful Sound

Febrero Point

PADDLING ROUTE

Map Source
NZMS 242
Sheet 4

Dagg Sound
Towing Head

Breaksea I.

Resolution Island

Five Fingers Peninsula

Five Finger Point
Anchor I.

Dusky Sound
South Point

Bradshaw Sound

Malaspina Reach

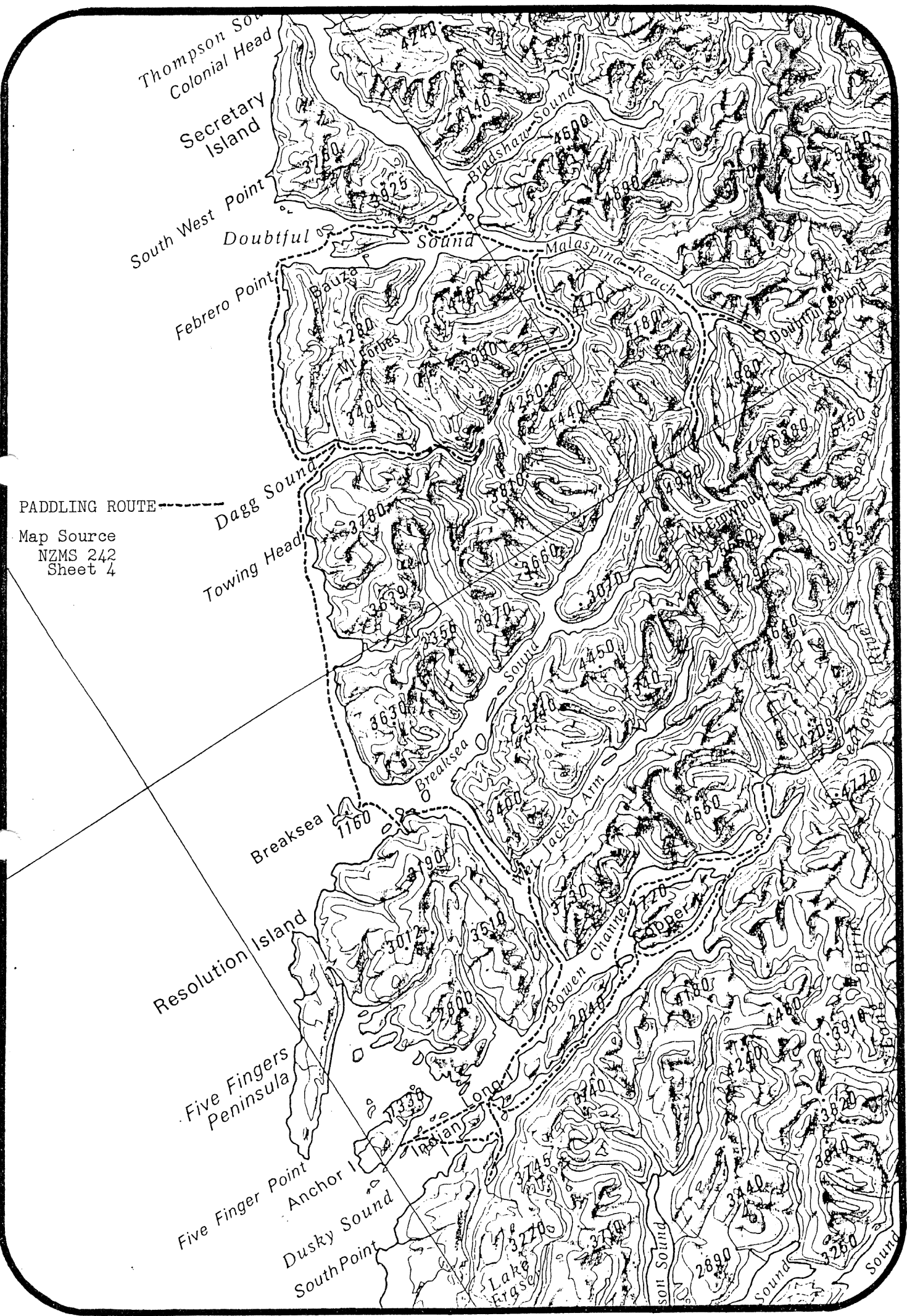
Breaksea Sound

Jacker Arm

Sowen Channel

Indian I.

Lake Frasier



The 5 am weather sched was again good, which meant that we could paddle up the coast to Doubtful Sound rather than repeat the 'overland' trek. The open sea passage was not as long and now Chrissie had been given some super effective 'sea-sick' pills. As the swell was more moderate we could paddle closer to shore and enjoy the scenery. Close to the entrance to Doubtful we encountered another cray boat and stopped for a chat. Their parting words, which we took in jest, were that the waves would get bigger up ahead. But sure enough, in the entrance to Doubtful the hitherto modest Northwesterly seemed to pick up and created a mean breaking chop abeam, giving us an hour of very hard paddling before we reached appropriately named Shelter Island.

The continuing brilliant sun encouraged a long lunch break which included sleeping stretched out on the warm smooth rocks, mussel collection and snorkelling in the luxuriant sea-weed gardens surrounding the island. As elsewhere, we were struck by the fact that the upper meter or so of the sea was virtually fresh water and that only after going through a funny mixing zone did you get into the warmer salt water. As we paddled up Doubtful Sound - along Malaspina Reach - we felt drawn back from the openness of the coast and the exquisite islands that dot the entrance to the fiords into the vertical walls and barren peaks. Though separated by only a few kilometers the atmosphere of the two were very different. The target for the evening was an attractive looking spot on the mainland at the intersection of Doubtful and Thompson Sounds. However, another long chat with people on a returning cray boat (same one) yielded the information that there was near at hand on Secretary Island a Forest Service hut - complete with hot showers, open for public use. We parted again with a small bag of crays 'for tea' and found the hut. It exceeded expectations, even the fantastic view straight up Doubtful Sound out of the main window. So pleasant, in fact, that we decided to stay and make a day trip from there up into Bradshaw Arm to Precipice Cove. This excursion led to an encounter with a Fiordland Penguin, who surveyed us from his rock with complete disinterest. On the return we spotted a commotion on the water ahead which we discovered to be a large pod of Dolphins. We had encountered a pod several times in Dusky also. The return latish in the day across Bradshaw gave us another Northwesterly blast across the beam, along with a bit of rain.

As we were scheduled to meet our return transport the following afternoon - two weeks to the hour after our departure - our last evening meal had to be special - the last of the Green Ginger Wine. As we were finishing a charter boat from Auckland that we had crossed paths with earlier, anchored in our cove. A delegation came up for a chat bearing a fresh apple crisp with cream. This led to the observation that for an extended trip in Fiordland all you needed was a few days of rations until you got the hang of living off the land!

Morning of the last day presented a wall of fog up Doubtful which did not lift during our leisurely departure. We could finally use our new marine compass, purchased especially for the trip. As the morning wore on a brisk Northwesterly again blew up, clearing the fog very smartly and with the aid of Eric's tent fly as a spinnaker, blew the rafted-up kayaks along at a reasonable 5 kph. A passing cray boat viewed the apparition of a billowing tent fly moving up the Sound with some amusement. A lunch stop at the entrance to Hall Arm found Eric and Chrissie more interested in sun bathing and Eric and Betty keen on one more sightsee. Hall Arm is a spectacular combination of broad forested U-shaped hanging glacial valleys and at its head, great bare granite domes.

In the meantime the Northwesterly had increased and the sightseers on their return paddle were presented with as mean a set of conditions as on the whole trip. A big chop built up along the whole length of Doubtful, bouncing off vertical walls immediately to the right, with the wind doing funny things upon encountering the same wall. We were all quite happy to reach the relative shelter of Deep Cove.

Our discussion on paddles, begun in issue number 2 will continue in a later issue.