

## *Eda Frandsen: a voyage to the Dark Ages*

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In the so-called Dark Ages, that period between the end of the Roman Empire and the Age of the Vikings, it is easy to imagine a Britain cut off from the civilised world. One imagines woollen-cloaked monks huddling in freezing stone cells; peasants grubbing through the ruins of once-noble towns; an empty sea. As an archaeologist, I know that picture is false. The Dark Ages are obscure: we see them through a glass, darkly; but they were not empty of civilisation, and the seas were very far from being empty. In the days of St Brendan, who is said to have sailed all the way to America in a hide-covered curragh and lived to tell the tale, the Atlantic west of Europe was a busy place. The monasteries and royal halls of Ireland, Wales, Scotland and Cornwall were able, periodically, to enjoy the fruits of Mediterranean vineyards; they exchanged letters and precious books with their counterparts in Rome; occasionally they were visited by travellers from Jerusalem or Alexandria; this was a connected world.

In embarking on a series of journeys through Dark Age landscapes, for the most part on foot, in 2013 and 2014, I wanted to experience something of the seaways known to Brendan, St Patrick and the warriors and argonauts of the Early Medieval period. The most vital of these was the Irish Sea, which connected the kingdoms and monasteries of those lands with Gaul, Spain and the maritime of Empire of Byzantium. Who would take me on such an unlikely latter-day pilgrimage?

James Mackenzie came to my rescue. Owner and skipper of *Eda Frandsen*, a 1930's 56ft Danish gaff cutter based in Falmouth, James and his two-woman crew take guests north for the summer sailing season, when they are based in Mallaig. Here was an almost perfect trip for my research, so I persuaded my partner, Sarah, to join me for the 2014 delivery voyage.

James is a consummate sailor: he has not only sailed many boats in all waters; he has built and rigged them, too. He loves to share his passion for the sea and, in indulging my curiosity about Early Medieval pilotage and boats, seaways and harbours, he showed a sensitivity to the heritage of seafaring reflected in the care lavished on *Eda*. She is all beautifully-varnished wood and polished brass with a sweeping taffrail and an unconventional saddle-style helm, a caprice of her first owner. She was originally a fishing vessel, weatherly and swift; she has not much more than eighteen inches of freeboard on the aft deck, so in sailing her one feels as close to the water as its possible to get.

I had a wish-list of places I would like to visit; the Scillies, Dalkey island off Dublin, the Isle of Man; Iona, of course, the jewel of Dark Age monastic sites, foundation of St Columba. James looked at my list, smiled, and said; 'We'll see'.

Our first day's passage, on a bright and breezy April day, was a blast: Falmouth to St Mary's in about twelve hours, on a sea lumpy with Atlantic swells and a cross-grained Channel residue from some half-remembered squall. *Eda's* distinctive gaff, surely the most beautiful of all sails, russet-brown

against the crisp cream of her foresails and jib, acts like a giant rudder – wonderfully responsive when the wind is on the beam and a little alarming for a newbie on the helm when she is gybing. I had sailed before – on the square-rigger *STS Lord Nelson* and in 30ft cruisers; but this was something different: immediate, tactile, absolutely connected to water and weather. That tangibility of experience runs through the whole *Eda Frandsen* experience: the tarry roughness of the rigging – block and tackle much in evidence; not a winch in sight – the cosy intimacy of the saloon below and the bunks fore and aft; the sense that *Eda* loves being sailed and that her crew love sailing her.

The Scillies are a special archipelago. Still a single land mass as late as the Roman period, they became inundated during the decades and centuries of the early saints, after who some of them – like St Samson – are named. The Scillies, lying directly in the path of Gaulish and Mediterranean vessels trading up the Irish Sea, were a sort of gateway, trading post, information hub and melting pot of cultures. Merchants seeking markets for their trinkets, wine, olive oil or grain and in return hoping for a cargo of tin, marten furs, salt, deer-hounds or slaves, acquired pilots for their onward voyage, gossip and perhaps additional crew. The islanders did well out of them and hermitages and small chapels abounded among small islands that provided perfect solitude for monks seeking to emulate the privacy and contemplative lives of the desert fathers, from whom they took their spiritual inspiration.

We anchored for the night, took a stroll among the sub-tropical gardens of Hugh Town and caught the afternoon tide the following day. For a two-night passage towards the Isle of Man we were divided into watches. Sarah and I, and fellow passenger Rolf Winzeler, a very jovial Swiss Border Guard (improbable, I know), were placed in the care of Melissa Williams, James's first mate, experienced sailor and survivor of a dismasting in the Pacific: tough, capable and hilarious, if not always intentionally. We stood four-hour watches through the entrance to St George's Channel (as it happened, it was St George's day, 23rd April), across Cardigan Bay in light winds, and then, on a starless and wild night, a little west of the Llŷn peninsula: the brilliant firework-display lights of the Holyhead to Dublin ferry dazzling ahead in the pitch black. One felt sensationally alive; dolphins played tag with us; the odd bird dropped aboard for a rest.

St Patrick's Isle, at Peel on the west coast of the Isle of Man, was our second landfall. I could not have wished for a mooring more redolent of the Dark Age spirit. Whether St Patrick ever came here is hard to say; but there was a very early church, perched on this gem of an island barely connected to the mainland by a narrow sandy isthmus, now a mole boasting a lifeboat station and a charming art-deco café that sold unctuous, dripping kipper baps. The island is now enclosed by the ruined walls of a great castle; a Viking-Age watchtower and medieval cathedral complete the picture. As the only harbour on Man's west coast Peel has always been a haven for traders, the seat of great lords and a base for pirates. Man was frequently fought over, its strategically crucial site at the centre of the Irish Sea basin variously coveted by British Kings of North Wales, Vikings, and Irishmen. Its original language was Gaelic, once in danger of extinction but now revived. Peel is a genteel town, otherworldly, the hills behind it emerald green, with glorious blue-rimmed views across to Ireland's distant coast.

After a first full night of sleep in three days, refreshed, we set sail again on a late afternoon of unsurpassed perfection: a milky, breezeless sea, brilliant pyrotechnic sunset over the port bow with Ireland ahead and to the west, the Rhinns of Galloway to starboard. For once cruising on *Eda's*

diesel engines, and with an occasional glance at the bright screen of her AIS to check for any large vessels in our path, for once we were all on deck, nine of us, with enticing smells wafting seductively aft from the skylight of cook Chlöe Gillat's galley below decks. A purple night fell; the wind rose and dropped in fits and starts; at one point, during the first of two watches which, in memory, have merged into a single, continuous stream of images and senses, we were tearing along with a six-knot tide, the breeze coming stiff from the east; at another we ghosted along on the engines, the converging beams of lighthouses on Rathlin Island and Sanda piercing against the black, black cliffs of Kintyre. At one point, I remember, we hove-to to reef the gaff and bring in one of the foresails. It is a surreal experience, putting on the brakes in the middle of a bouncing sea, all sails and rigging flapping like crazy, barked orders to avoid the swinging boom and controlled heaving on the mainsheet to haul her back onto the wind – wonderfully exhilarating and slightly unnerving: the sea a giant and we humbled, mere playthings; James all-seeing and directing. The only other thing that comes close is riding a motorcycle at high speed through unknown mountainous country; and that is another story.

It is one thing to sail as a passenger on a lovely classic vessel; it is quite another to steer her, feeling the tantalising edge of the luff through the wheel, that vital stiffness as the perfect aerofoil surfaces of drum-tight foresail and gaff suck the boat's bows through the surf. We raced north-east through the Sound of Jura (past the cottage where George Orwell wrote 1984) on a day of scudding cloud, all hands (seven paying crew, James and Mel) at the taffrail or standing forward, feeling the power and tension full-face, gripping shroud or forestays. The sea feels different in these northern waters: the backdrop of mountain and moor, the light, the sublimity of starlit nights, draws one on towards the lands of the Pole Star.

After a peaceful overnight anchorage at Crinan, close to Dunadd, the legendary fortress of the Dark Age kings of Dál Riata, we crossed the awesome tidal race, a standing wave, that produces one of the world's great maritime forces, the Corryvreckan whirlpool – 'cauldron of the freckled seas' – said to be the lair of a kelpie, Cailleach Bheur, who washed her plaid there. These were the home waters of the monks of Iona, Columba's brethren. Columba's Life, written a hundred years after his death in 597, offers us an extraordinary insight into the maritime lives of these lands. More than sixty sea voyages are described, including the visits of sea captains bearing news of Vesuvius erupting and a stranded Gaulish bishop, who was able to dictate to the then abbot an account of his journey to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

The tides were against my dream of sailing to Iona (I have been there on the ferry, but it's not the same thing); James compensated by bringing us into Tobermory harbour: surely, we were the most beautiful boat in the most beautiful harbour in all the Atlantic waters. From the comfortable bench of a quayside bar, looking back at *Eda*, our home from home riding graceful at her anchorage with the low, wooded Calve Island and the Sound of Mull as a backdrop, the thought of parting from such company was a sudden, painful reality.

Our last night, anchored off Inverie close to Mallaig, was one of brilliant sunset, a final sumptuous meal, unspoken words of fellowship and good craic: the craic of shipmates, of fellow-voyagers and comrades. *Eda* is a gem; we shall sail with her again. I had satisfied part of my Dark Age curiosity; if I could not see into the minds of those ancient argonauts, I had sailed their sea and anchored in their harbours. I had felt their presence, not as the dry dust of old bones, but as an all-too brief visitor to their world.