

The Dark Side of the Mana

by Conrad Edwards

Titahi Bay, on a cold Thursday morning in June. I lie in bed wondering if the 4.15 a.m. alarm has been and gone. It is pitch dark but feels late. Forcing myself out of the warmth of bed, I check the clock – 4.13 a.m. A light wind whistles past the house, and a gentle surf surges onto the rocks below. I snuggle back and phone for the Cook Strait forecast: *Southerlies dying out and a twenty knot nor'wester developing*. Twenty knots is my self-imposed cut-off, so I lie warm in bed convincing myself to believe the weatherman, but can't. I get up, pull clothes on quickly and check outside. A light southerly chills me, but feels set for the three hours needed.

A strong coffee, a shave (only one nick), grab the briefcase, wallet and watch, and a short drive to the Onepoto boat shed. Practice allied with laziness has preparation off pat, and the sea kayak is soon on the jetty, loaded and ready.

By five past five I am paddling in the cold dark, hands first numb then throbbing then warm as I glide along the line of pole-moored boats, through a scattering of swing moorings and on past the lights of Paremata and the Marina, the reflections in the black seemingly brighter than the lights themselves. Out of the channel I head left, leaving the lights of civilisation behind.

The hills of Whitireia Park loom dark to my left, but I know from their shape where to head. I wonder what could be causing the white flashes ahead, until I am close enough to hear the roar and veer past surf crashing onto the point Mana Island stands out this morning, just, a squat monolith blacker still than the sea and sky. I aim to paddle around Mana every full moon by night my kayak is named the *Lady Lycanthrope* after her habit of accompanying me on these lunatic excursions. But last full moon the weather prevented it and with the Mana Island sea kayak race imminent, here I am, training and touring on an unusually dark sea, the nascent moon not due up before dawn.

I make course for Mana's north end. An unseen nor'westerly swell quarters in off the starboard bow. Three days previously I had attempted the same and the swell was the same, but then Mana, the sea and sky were all equally black and I had to turn back nauseous. Today, there is just enough of a horizon to give me reference, so I carry on, knowing it can only get lighter. The paddle swings rhythmically, almost soporific.

The occasional swell rises high enough to be seen above the horizon, but other than that I paddle by feel and by fear of the occasional ghost of a white cap. I would be safe enough come dawn and I could sit out waiting for that if necessary. The kayak glides through the dark, beads of phosphorescence streaming past, and occasionally landing on deck, glow worms of the sea I show no lights. Fizz boats are a concern and I carry a strobe to ward them off, but the unlit pirates that are a worry at dusk seem to be late starters. As for other kayaks, who would be out here at this hour?

It is a thirty minute crossing to Mana. As always, the seas rise somewhat on the last third, the effect of the tidal stream channelling around Mana and the wind tunnel between there and the Titahi Bay isthmus. It is still dark, and the ghostly white horses, raised by wind against the swell, gallop more frequently past under or over.

As on all crossings, the approaching land gets no larger, while over one's shoulder the land one left gets ever smaller, until suddenly, in front shades of black become distinct and one's target looms large, like parachutist's ground rush. I'm alongside Mana and steer to seaward of the noisy, but barely visible, surf. I play tag with rock and swell up to the seal colony at the nor'west corner. Too early in the year for residents, probably, but too dark to tell, certainly. The pinnacle rocks - my favourite place - are back lit periodically by the Brothers' light. I head for the gap between them, the usual and picturesque short-cut when a giant swell rises high above me, breaking through the gap and pushing the good *Lady* back into the dark on a sea of foam. I take the long route around.

The far, dark side of Mana is a wonderful place. Occasionally, ships or fishing boats are to be seen, but not this morning. Apart from the Brothers' light beckoning from the other side of the Strait there is no sign of man. The distinctive outline of Kapiti Island behind, Mana looming to the left the expansive coastline and hills of the Marlborough Sounds a jagged black band off the starboard bow. No lights, no voices, no engines. Only the sound of the raucous gulls and the surging sea, the splash of paddles and the surge of the bow through the water. The kevlar kayak with its carbon blades, the latest product of an age old pedigree, has become a time machine, transporting me back to pre-history.

But I'm paddling fast with a following sea and the time trip doesn't last long. As the *Lady Lycanthrope* and I near the south end, we see in succession increasing evidence of man: the light of Ohau Point, the clouds shining over unseen Wellington, and all of a sudden the rows of lights of Titahi Bay and Plimmerton and of the radio masts towering high above them, marking the course home.

The twilight before dawn is here, the black sea lightening through the shades of gray around me. There is light enough to negotiate the rock garden at Mana's south end, accelerated and exhilarated - if not helped - by the sea that continues to follow us around. No sign of the chop that so often dwells here, thankfully, and the sea dies down to a beautiful gun-metal gray, reflecting the lights of home. Neither is the tidal stream racing yet over Mana bridge, as we glide across the smoothly rippled sea, past the scattering of lights and the hum of a generator that mark Mana homestead and leave the shores of the island to cross the gap again.

The sea changes in a boat's length back to the one metre swell, breaking occasionally, now from the port beam. The same seas as before, but seeming much gentler, and certainly less nauseous, in the light of dawn. Another half hour crossing. A single petrel flits across the bow, then three more.

Eventually I pass my house, silhouetted dark above me, now obscured by the cliffs around Mount Cooper as I approach Plimmerton harbour. Towards the harbour mouth the eastern sky lightens to a silvery yellow and my black *Lady* gradually reverts to a vibrant red.

Back into the calm of the inlets. The boats that can have swung around to face me again, reassuring me that I have timed the tides right. The dark outline of a fizz boat follows the deep channel seaward, while I slink in close through the shadows. Perhaps they think they are the first crew out.

Dawn proper is arriving now and over my shoulder I catch glimpses of clouds rimmed a bright orange. If a warning, it is a beautiful one. I race against myself down the west side of Porirua inlet towards the boat shed, just as the trains, cars and trucks race each other down the east side towards the city. Two hours thirty five, a whole ten minutes faster than my previous best, pleasing but not half as pleasing as the paddle itself.

I put away the boat, pull on the luxury of dry clothes, wolf down toast and coffee and join the commuters driving to Wellington. Looking out from the car I see a sea of glum faces: if any of them care to look back, they will see one dishevelled, salt encrusted and grinning foolishly. A shower at work and by nine I'm at the desk in white shirt and tie, going through the motions of office and dreaming of the dark side of Mana.