

Facing Your Danger: Origins and Adoption Of Stern-First Drifting

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Norman Nevills called the technique "facing your danger". Once you turn the boat around and begin drifting stern-first, everything about it makes sense.

One pair of eyes and ears and one pair of oars is better than several pairs; and backing the boat downstream provides more maneuverability and slower closure with rock and water hazards, while letting the boatman see where he's going. The river elicits the technique, rewards its use, and even suggests boat design.

The drifting concept and its maneuvers are very teachable. But drifting can also be independently discovered and self-taught, and through the years it probably has been perpetuated by a combination of self-discovery and instruction.

Conventional lore has it that Nathaniel Galloway developed stern-first drifting and introduced it to Grand Canyon in 1897. Very likely, though, the technique was developed much earlier than that. In 1897 Galloway was a 44-year old hunter and trapper. By then he had probably been building boats and drifting the upper Green for fifteen or twenty years. Galloway may have been one originator of stern-first drifting but it's likely others originated it, too, and that Galloway, as a "river man" and main practitioner of the boat design / rowing technique for some forty years, was positioned to carry it forward.

George Flavell, who preceded Galloway down the river and through Grand Canyon in 1897, had a preference, or at least an intuition, for facing his danger. Flavell, a coastal boatman, didn't have fast-water expertise. But it seems that by 1897 others did.

Eight years earlier, when Robert Brewster Stanton was hired to organize Frank Brown's ill-fated Denver, Colorado Canyon and Pacific Railway survey expedition, he asked Brown for "special boatmen". Brown chose instead to have the rowing done by the surveyors and some friends he invited along as guests.

It's not clear who these special boatmen were; whether they had adopted the stern-first method of running fast water or were merely experienced fast water boatmen, in contrast to the men Brown chose. But Stanton knew something: he also referred to them as "northern river lumbermen", and he may have spent some time with them. Glen Canyon may have been a "chat room" for boating talk. Cass Hite's 1883

discovery of gold a few miles below the mouth of Crescent Creek triggered a boom and by the mid 1880's there were a lot of prospectors up and down Glen Canyon and most of them had gotten there by boat. By the time Stanton passed through in 1889 there were several hundred men working the bars between Hite City and Lees Ferry. Stanton and others routinely stopped to talk or even camp with these prospectors. It's not difficult to imagine the conversations turning to opinions of boats and boat handling.

It was in Glen Canyon that Stanton met Nathaniel Galloway, and Galloway later met Julius Stone. That in turn led to Stone's Galloway-led expedition down the river. Later river runners pored over Stone's and Stanton's writings, and the design of Stone's Galloway-type boat was emulated until Norman Nevills designed boats for his 1938 expedition through Cataract and Grand canyons.

At the time he died in 1949 Norm had, for about ten years, been known as The World's No. 1 Fast-Water Man. During the 1940s the Nevills Expeditions and their attendant newspaper, magazine, and film coverage produced a new form of adventure travel, even though that phrase hadn't yet been coined.

Norm came on the scene about sixty-five years after Major Powell and thirty years after Stone's expedition. By 1949 Norm had made whitewater boating a vacation activity. His cataract boats were the craft of choice, and he had popularized the technique he called "facing your danger". Norman attributed some combination of boat design and rowing technique to his father, whom he said had picked them up during the Yukon gold rush. W.E. Nevills does appear to have influenced the earlier boat design, but Norm appears to have worked out the 1938 design and the "facing your danger" technique for himself, between 1934 and 1938.

By 1938 marine plywood was available. Using specially milled sheets of Super Harbord five feet wide and sixteen feet long, Norm was able to build his boats with one-piece sides and bottom rather than butt-joined or lapstraked planking.

The Nevills Cataract Boats were expedition boats, meant to get a boatman down the river. As in earlier expedition boats, space for passengers was either in the end of the cockpit or out on the deck.

When river running emerged as a form of adventure travel, passenger space became an imperative. That resulted in the introduction of inflatables and the redesign of dories. But whatever the craft, "facing your danger" has continued to be the time-tested way to run whitewater rivers.