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John M. MacAulay. *Seal-Folk and Ocean Paddlers.* Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1998. xv + 110 pp. Â£7.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-874267-39-3.

Reviewed by Boria Sax (Mercy College)
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Scholarship, in my opinion, is not done properly when it is simply a job and not a passion. John MacAulay, author of *Seal-Folk and Ocean Paddlers*, comes to scholarship as an inspired amateur. He is, the book informs us, a former shipwright and yacht skipper. He grew up speaking Gaelic and listening to storytellers in the Hebridean islands.

Drawing on a wealth of local material, MacAulay argues that the seal people and mermaids repeatedly sighted off the Scottish coast may have been people in kayaks, perhaps Lapplander or even Greenland Eskimos. The tales in which the supernatural creatures discard their skins to become human might refer to emergence from a kayak, which is like a second skin. He supports his thesis with a close examination of several legends. Then he goes on to discuss the construction of boats by people living near the Arctic circle.

The problem is that MacAulay does not look at sources outside his region. Legends of seal people and of mermaids are often virtually identical to those of swan maidens and many other supernatural creatures, found throughout Eurasia and the world. Mermaids, most especially, are not necessarily explained by kayakers, since they have been regularly sighted not only in the far North but also in the Caribbean and just about everywhere.

On the other hand, there need not always be a single explanation for phenomena such as mermaid sightings. Some of these might indeed have been kayakers, even though all of them could not. Even if MacAulay were to prove entirely wrong, however, the fascinating lore and legend he has collected to support his thesis still make this book well worth attention.

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