



## **The Brendan Voyage: A Leather Boat Tracks the Discovery of America by the Irish Sailor Saints**

*Tim Severin*

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## **The Brendan Voyage: A Leather Boat Tracks the Discovery of America by the Irish Sailor Saints** Tim Severin

Could an Irish monk in the sixth century really have sailed all the way across the Atlantic in a small open boat, thus beating Columbus to the New World by almost a thousand years? Relying on the medieval text of St. Brendan, award-winning adventure writer Tim Severin painstakingly researched and built a boat identical to the leather curragh that carried Brendan on his epic voyage. He found a centuries-old, family-run tannery to prepare the ox hides in the medieval way; he undertook an exhaustive search for skilled harness makers (the only people who would know how to stitch the three-quarter-inch-thick hides together); he located one of the last pieces of Irish-grown timber tall enough to make the mainmast. But his courage and resourcefulness were truly tested on the open seas, including one heart-pounding episode when he and his crew repaired a dangerous tear in the leather hull by hanging over the side--their heads sometimes submerged under the freezing waves--to restitch the leather. A modern classic in the tradition of Kon-Tiki, *The Brendan Voyage* seamlessly blends high adventure and historical relevance. It has been translated into twenty-seven languages since its original publication in 1978.

With a new Introduction by Malachy McCourt, author of *A Monk Swimming*

## **The Brendan Voyage: A Leather Boat Tracks the Discovery of America by the Irish Sailor Saints Details**

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Author : Tim Severin

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## **From Reader Review The Brendan Voyage: A Leather Boat Tracks the Discovery of America by the Irish Sailor Saints for online ebook**

### **Sceadugenga says**

I recently finished reading Odinn's Child by the same author and wasn't overly impressed, but the fact that the book was well written and was very descriptive led me to believe that Severin's non-fiction books might just be on the mark. I read the free kindle excerpt and was happily proved right, needless to say, i subsequently downloaded the complete book. Whereas Severin's writing style tends to bog the reader down when writing historical fiction in this book it really flows creating a veritable page-turner. The only problem I had was the lack of detailed diagrams of the Brendan and a map of the route taken. I recommend this book to anyone with an interest in medieval history and shipbuilding as well as "kon-tiki-esque" adventures.

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### **Kent says**

One of the most fascinating books I've read in a long time. The author tells the step-by-step how he researched, and then built, a replica of the boat St Brendan used in the "Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis." His object is to prove it was possible for Brendan and his monks to have sailed to America from Ireland, and he does so by completing the voyage himself in his replicated boat.

Several things I really liked about this. First was the description of all the craftsmanship that went into the construction of this boat. In order to follow as exactly as possible the processes that would have been used by a seventh-century Irishman, Severin had to find craftsman in the United Kingdom who still practised the ancient techniques, from tanning and stitching the leather to the actual construction of a traditional Irish curragh. Severin stopped several times to mention how difficult (in some cases impossible) it was for modern artisans to reach the level of skill found in ancient leatherwork of the times.

It struck me that this skills--handiwork of all sorts--were exactly suited to monastic life, requiring as they did slow, patient, incredibly tedious and detailed work, repeated with infinite patience. And the amount of sheer observation, experiment, and perseverance it would have taken to arrive at these techniques in the first place, could probably only have arisen in a contemplative society.

Secondly, I really enjoyed reading about their encounters with marine life. They were surrounded by whales who seemed quite curious about the other leather-skinned object in the water with them, and Severin mentioned several times how the whales would disappear the instant a large modern boat hove into sight. It sounds like we don't know what we're missed by sailing around in the monstrous ships of today.

They also watched a school of whales being attacked by a killer whale, a possible parallel to St Brendan's encounter with a sea monster that was attacked and driven off by a second monster of fiercer aspect yet.

Lastly, it made me really want to visit the Hebrides and the Faroes islands. He met a family on the Faroes that had lived in the same house for **eighteen** generations. They were invited to a feast for which the head of the family dressed in a "splendid 17th century costume."

So anyway.

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### **Katra says**

I love a good adventure story. I love amazing nuggets from history. I love learning about far away places. Wrap them all up and you have the Brenden Voyage, a fascinating read for the brain, the imagination and the senses.

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### **Andy says**

Read as part of my Goodreads Ireland challenge for 2017

Been meaning to get around to reading one of Tim Severin's voyage books after loving his Odinn's Child Viking series & so this challenge was the perfect excuse as first up was the genre "Travel" & so as a lateral move I plumped for this as being my "travel" book" I think it jus about counts!

Having stood next to the Kon-tiki raft in Oslo Museum & seeing the size of it..... they sailed across the Pacific in THAT!! Madness!! It does add an element of bewilderment whilst reading the Brendan voyage at their bravado.

The opening chapter is entitled STORM & we begin only 30 miles into our journey off the West Coast of Ireland & it's a start full of trepidation as experienced sailors cast nervous glances at each other & Tim Severin muses about a conversation he had months previously about the effect of salt water on leather..... the boat is constructed of leather Ox hides stretched over a wooden frame. It's a frightening start & in part awe inspiring as you realise almost immediately what an undertaking this actually was!

The basis for the voyage was a text called the Navgatio which describe the legendary voyage of the Irish monk St Brendan from Ireland & it is a fantastical tale, at first, as the text describes The Isle of Sheep (Faroe Islands), the isle of Smiths (Iceland) & the promised land (North America) & makes reference to all sorts of beasts & strange experiences. Was the text actually a factual account of a voyage of Irish monks that found the Americas hundreds of years before the Vikings & a 1000 years before Columbus? The book relates to the text throughout & evidence/similarities amass during the Brendan voyage as too the accuracy of the text, it's certainly compelling.

Tim Severin is very much a can-do type of explorer & his first experience of a similar boat was to ask locals if they could go out to sea in one of their hide canoes.... there like you don't wanna be doing that! It takes a fair bit of bribery to make it happen as he basically puts one to sea to see how it "handles" – certainly a brave adventurer & the book is full of similar stories which makes it very entertaining & as ive already said "awe inspiring"

There is a LOT of background to the history of such boats, construction methods etc but it's never boring as the people he meets all have stories to tell along the way & it's a very good flowing read – probably moreso than his foray into non-fiction in truth. Anecdotes & humour intermingle with the text & make for an entertaining flowing read, its not overdone (padding) as some books can be & the balance is jus spot-on.

An incredible amount of time went into the building of this boat with three years spent in research,

development, construction & sea trials before it's eventual launch. One incredible statistic for you – there was over 30,000 hand stitches put into the sewing of the Oxfide leather framework!

There's so many stories about the adventure throughout such as the Orca encounter when the Bull whale comes up & sniffs the Cow hide leather smeared in sheep fat boat..... the Ice floes chapter where they hole the boat & have to stitch a patch on it partly underwater in freezing cold temperatures in an area that only days before had holed & sunk an 8000+ tones ice breaker now ferry off the Canadian coast..... the encounters with other ships who are just amazed at coming across them in the middle of the Ocean & all say "your doing what??!!" "you've come from where!!??" repeated the US Navy ship three times.

The antics/interaction of the crew is a tale in itself & enliven the journey despite the at times awful & potentially deadly conditions.

At the end there is a section on the Navigatio chronicles which clearly show compelling evidence that such an undertaking was achieved, as well as the boat specifications & voyage tests that were performed to measure the changes in the boat construction/strength etc

For me it's 4.5 stars rounded up to 5, a great read & highly recommend.

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### **Summer says**

An exciting myth brought to real life. Tim Severin and his crew prove what scholars debated for years. The manuscripts of the Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis were more than just a story. The Navigatio was really (when stripped of all the fantasy) a log of the Irish monks travels to North America. They could have sailed to North America in their skin boats hundreds of years before anyone else. I thought it was really interesting how some of the modern equipment they brought along proved to be inferior to what the Irish monks would have used.

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### **Marcus Johnson says**

This book had me totally absorbed, even though in no way would I have liked to have been part of this adventure (I cherish my comforts). I liked the early part the best, as the author was trying to re-create his boat as authentically as possible.

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### **Sylvain says**

Same style as Kon Tiki.

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### **John of Canada says**

Amazing. Irish history, dangerous journey, indomitable spirit, cooperation above and beyond what is typical ... I really enjoyed the description of the materials needed to build a leather boat and the work and science

involved. The journey was harrowing and reading about it was tense in the extreme. This book is a keeper.

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### **Peter Adrian says**

I had heard of the legend of St. Brendan the Navigator for years, and finally found this book in my local public library- while looking for something else altogether. What an adventure! Told with patience, humility, and humor, Tim Severin chronicles the evolution of the voyage from a dinner-table conversation to its ultimate, successful conclusion. Imagine Thor Heyerdahl in the frozen North Atlantic and you'll have the general idea. Fans of maritime history, adventure travel, and all things Ireland will find hours of good reading in "The Brendan Voyage."

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### **Carol Bakker says**

I'm out of breath from gasping. I'm oxygen-deprived from holding my breath. My husband is battered by my insistent demands that he "listen to this!" What a thriller!

Tim Severin retraces the route St. Brendan (c. 489 A.D.) sailed in a curragh covered with forty-nine oxhides. He calls his open boat Brendan, in honor of the Irish Saint who wrote the *Navigatio*, and the journey he takes, *The Brendan Voyage*. "It dawned on me that the *Brendan Voyage* was going to be a detective story."

The narrative is divided between the research and making of the *Brendan*, the crew recruited to sail, and the journey itself interspersed with landfalls along the Stepping Stone Route. Of course, I had a world atlas at my side and followed the adventure with my index finger.

"Our advance was a cross between bumper cars at a fairground and a country square dance, except that our dancing partners were leviathans of ice as they dipped, circled, and curtsied. Again and again we slithered past floes, listening to the bump and crunch as ice brushed the leather hull, the sharper tremor and rattle as we ran over scraps of small ice, the shudder as ice fragments the size of table tops and weighing a couple of hundred pounds ricocheted off the blade of the steering paddle."

(borrowed from Kindle Lending Library)

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### **Markus says**

The *Brendan Voyage*  
By Tim Severin

Across the Atlantic in a leather boat.

This true story is told in the first person by the skipper of an exceptional historical and archaeological sailing adventure.

Tim Severin was inspired by “Navigato” an ancient Latin document from the legend of Saint Brendan of the sixth century. He decided to make a copy of the ancient leather vessel and undertake the voyage to America.

He wanted to prove that it had been done in the sixth century and thereby confirm that America was discovered long before Erik the Viking and long before Christoph Columbus.

He was able to raise enormous interest in the Irish seafaring community and found sponsors, as well as scientists and friends to help him build the boat with the right kind of wood and leather and with the exact specifications he had found in ancient records.

After succeeding to build the boat Tim had the great fortune to find the right crew for his adventure.

The journey followed Saint Brendan’s northern course, using the same ‘stepping stones’ for provisions and food.

They started in May 1976 from Ireland, then along Scotland and later arriving at the Faroes, The Sheep Islands.

Against strong winds, Gail storms, unfavourable tides, enormous waves, they had to learn how to handle the boat which behaved like a surfboard, as it had no keel and only two square sails. It could be steered just downwind. Directional navigation proved to be very difficult.

So they skidded along, confronting hair-raising dangers and adventures.

Wherever the ship anchored the welcome was extraordinary. Everyone seemed to know the team and the Brendan on its way to America.

From the Faroes, they turned west and reached Reykjavik in Iceland in good shape.

Annual wind patterns were the reason they decided to make a winter break there.

It is likely the ancient monks would have proceeded in the same fashion.

In spring, with favourable winds prevailing, the leather boat was put afloat, and the last leg of the trip was to be mastered in one stretch. Passing along Greenland without landing.

The adventure almost ended in disaster when the boat got trapped in pack ice. Enormous ice blocks were surrounding them and tended to crash the little vessel at any moment.

With a tiny mirror blinking, they succeeded in attracting a coastguard ship that came to their rescue.

They made landfall in Newfoundland in June 1977.

Tim Severin is not only a good skipper but also a good storyteller.

I have been gripped by this adventure as if I had been one of them, and wish I could have.

This is a book not to be missed by any reader of real-life adventure stories.

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## **Jennifer says**

Just pure awesome. For fans of practical archealogy.

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## **Melody says**

I loved this. It started a little slow for me, but before I knew what hit me, I was eyeball-deep in the adventure. And what an adventure! I want to know more about what has happened to the sailors since this voyage. I loved reading about all of the meticulous care they took to make sure that the boat was as close to medieval as it could be. I was on the edge of my seat when they were navigating the ice field. If you like boats and adventures and intrepid monks, don't miss this one.

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## **Gill says**

I have been reading a number of books to help with my own fictional one, trying to build a picture of life long ago. This book discussed and described an epic real voyage - from the west coast of Ireland, where the ship, a curragh, was built - to the East coast of Newfoundland. It also goes into the building process and details of the research carried out into the possibilities of using a leather-covered wooden double frame for the ship, and building it entirely using conventional materials and techniques available at the time of the original Brendan voyages, throughout.

Despite it being a travel log, in effect, it manages to create tension and excitement in the description of some of the hazards encountered - whales, weather, ice... some of which would also have been encountered by Brendan's party and others of which were caused by the conditions under which the crew - mostly of four men - made the modern voyage. Climate change, lack of familiarity with the methods of controlling a curragh at sea, the attempt to use modern foodstuffs and packaging (traditional food was far more satisfactory when at the point of restocking in Iceland it was largely adopted), and the fact they suffered so much from exhaustion due to having a crew of 4 rather than that Brendan took which was 3, 4 or 5 times larger- all these were added problems, and how they overcame them and the real dangers they faced, makes for gripping reading in places.

This hardback edition had lavish colour photos interspersed through the book and the large size and clear print made it a pleasure to read for my older eyes. I am ploughing through technical appendices having read the condensed version of the original Brendan texts (there are over 100 in existence) is taking time, and not strictly necessary, unless like me, you are reading for technical knowhow as well as a good adventure story read.

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## **Cindy Tomamichel says**

An interesting book in line with the ancient boat trips series of Thor Heyerdahl. This one rebuilds a leather and wood boat and sails from Ireland to the Americas.

Quite enjoyable, with some interesting descriptions of the places, wildlife and characters they meet. The building of the boat and sourcing material, and comparing it to ancient techniques is a highlight. Re

experiencing the adventures of Saint Brendan, and finding out the ancient stories are most likely real places and events was also fascinating.

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