

THE HERALD ON FRIDAY, MAY 11, 2007

5

BOOKS – PAT CANDIDO'S PICK OF THE PAGE-TURNERS

History of Dusi in Ian Player's revised edition

MEN, RIVERS AND CANOES by Ian Player (Echoing Green Press)
Reviewed by GUY ROGERS

WHEN Ian Player pioneered the Dusi Canoe Race, the equipment and methods were a little different.

The canoe he and his partner trained on was made of a double canvas layer and weighed 150 pounds (68kg) laden. They learnt how to patch it using pieces of old clothes soaked in glue, and smeared themselves with olive oil to ward off the cold. When Player's partner had to pull out of the attempt, he packed his provisions including a .32 revolver into empty paint tins and set off. It was December 23, 1950. His trip became one of South Africa's great adventure stories.

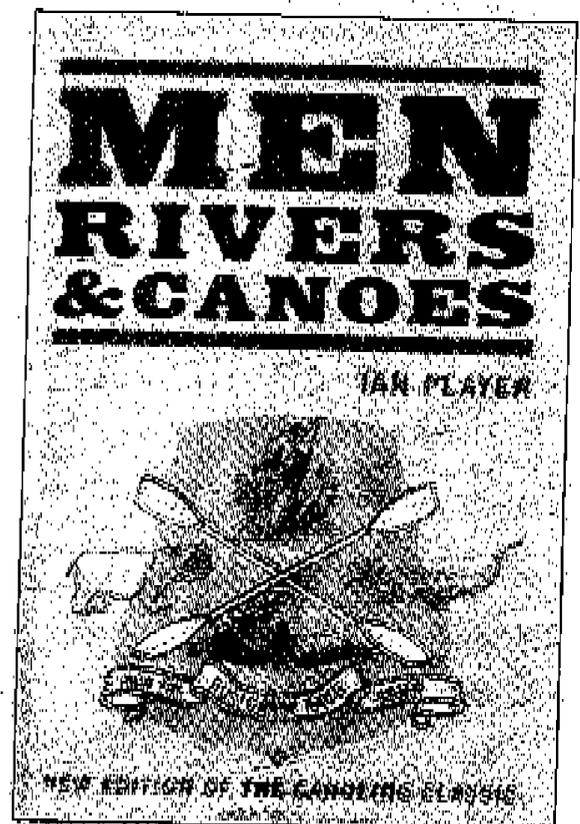
"The old brooding spirit of Africa was there," he writes, "but you only realised it when you battled against it."

Having pioneered the Dusi-Umngeni Maritzburg-Durban route as well as the Umkomaas River, the author went on to win the Dusi Canoe Race the first three years it was staged after that. He then became a game ranger and the tale of his early years on the Pongolo River floodplain is unique.

There was no Jozini Dam then and the area below the Lubombo Mountains was a vast wilderness. He writes of the anti-poaching patrols, the troublesome local cane brew called moba, a hippo feast and the curious affliction of Ndumu-itis.

Then there is the pioneering journey he and Ken Tinley undertook down the Pongolo River. The symbol of this extraordinary trip was the crocodiles, which were everywhere, lumbering menacingly off the sandbanks on their "high walk", and crashing into the water as the humans paddled by, sliding past and under the boat. It's amazing that they were not attacked and eaten.

The new edition of *Men, Rivers and Canoes* includes a foreword by the former



head of Natal Wildlife Conservation Col Jack Vincent, that was left out of the first edition by mistake, as well as by Willem van Riet, head of the Peace Parks Foundation, who was himself a top canoeist, uncontested Dusi king Graham Pope-Ellis and Inkozi Zibuse Mlaba.

Another chapter that adds good value to the new edition is the appraisal of the Dusi and the political era through which it grew, the years of antagonism between the locals and the paddlers and the subsequent partnerships, forged by people like Mlaba, that have now been established. An amazing list of all the finishers 1951-2006 was included at Player's insistence.

This book is one of its kind, a slim volume of Africana that will interest not only canoeists but all lovers of the outdoors, and anyone interested in a powerful, authentic South African voice.

grogers@johnnicc.co.za