

## REVIEWS

**ASTRONAUTS OF CAPE HORN – Nicholas Gray. Published in hard covers by The Conrad Press [[www.theconradpress.com](http://www.theconradpress.com)] at £16.99. 240 158mm x 240mm pages, plus 15 pages of good-quality mono photographs and a chartlet. ISBN 978-1-9115-4638-2**

*Astronauts of Cape Horn* owes its unusual title to the fact that by the time of the sixth and last moon landing in 1972, twelve men had stood on that alien surface but only eleven had doubled Cape Horn singlehanded. Some of the latter are well-known, at least to fellow sailors, but others are now almost forgotten. Nicholas Gray, himself a very experienced singlehanded sailor, has done much to rectify this between the covers of this fascinating book.

The first recorded rounding of Cape Horn – as against passage through the Magellan Strait – was in 1615, and it was almost another 200 years before land was discovered to the south. Prior to the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 it became the graveyard of countless fully-crewed ships and men. As (almost) every cruiser knows, the first man to circumnavigate singlehanded was Joshua Slocum, who left Boston in 1895 aboard the *Spray*, but like most smaller vessels of the time he passed through the Magellan Strait. He was followed by Harry Pigeon, Alain Gerbault, Edward Miles and Louis Bernicot in the 1920s and '30s.

A prodigious amount of reading and research – allied to at least one stroke of sheer luck – went into the writing of this book. This (fairly well-read) reviewer had never heard of Alfon Hansen, who left Norway in 1932 aboard his 36ft Colin Archer-designed gaff cutter *Mary Jane*. Amazingly, received wisdom at the time was that the best season in which to double the Horn was June or July, the depths of the southern winter. Accordingly, Hansen left Buenos Aires in June 1934. He later called in at a town more than 1000 miles up the Chilean coast, but after leaving to continue north was never seen again. Meeting Hansen in Buenos Aires early in 1934 may well have inspired Argentinean Vito Dumas, who in 1942 left his homeland aboard his 31ft *Legh II* to head eastabout, finally doubling the Horn in June 1943 as related in his *Alone Through the Roaring Forties*.

Next to set off was Frenchman Marcel Bardiaux in his home-built *Les 4 Vents*, variously reported as either 25ft or 30ft (LWL, LOD or LOA?), who left France in October 1950 and reached Cape Horn in May 1952, only to hit a (small) iceberg which forced him to return to Ushuaia for repairs – via the Beagle Channel as he had already passed Cape Horn. He finally entered the Pacific via the Magellan Strait – almost certainly the first non-naval vessel to pass through all three passages in a single season.

Fourth to head for the Horn alone was Australian Bill Nance, who left

the UK aged 23 in December 1961 aboard *Cardinal Vertue* (a sistership of Humphrey Barton's *Vertue XXXV*). Unlike Dumas and Bardiaux he never wrote about his voyage, and Nicholas Gray only learned the details due to the stroke of luck referred to previously – a chance contact with Pam Wall, OCC Port Officer for Fort Lauderdale, Florida whose late husband Andy had doubled the Horn with Nance's brother Bob (see *Flying Fish* 2014/2) and who had kept in contact with Bill. Like Dumas, Nance headed eastabout via the Cape of Good Hope and the southern Indian Ocean, the last 2000 miles to Australia under jury rig. After two years in New Zealand, on 1st December 1964 he set off across the Southern Ocean towards Cape Horn, which he rounded on 7th January. *Astronauts of Cape Horn* is worth buying for this chapter alone.

The chain continued, with Edward Allcard doubling the Horn in 1966 after a chance meeting with Bill Nance in Buenos Aires. His 36ft yawl *Sea Wanderer* was 55 years old by then but appears to have coped admirably, a voyage recounted in *Solo Around Cape Horn*, published shortly before Allcard's death last year and reviewed in *Flying Fish* 2017/1.

Compared to their predecessors, the encounters of Sir Francis Chichester, Sir Alec Rose and Sir Robin Knox-Johnston with Cape Horn in 1967, 1968 and 1969 are well-documented on film as well as in print. Very different characters sailing very different boats, all three wrote about their circumnavigations, in *Gipsy Moth Circles the World*, *My Lively Lady* and *A World of My Own*, all of which make interesting reading. All three yachts are still sailing.

Frenchman Bernard Moitessier, like Sir Robin a competitor in the 1968 Golden Globe Race, passed south of the Horn in his 38ft *Joshua* in February 1969, but remained in the Southern Ocean past the Cape of Good Hope and eventually made landfall in Tahiti. Also in the Golden Globe Race was Nigel Tetley sailing the Piver-designed trimaran *Victress*, the first multihull to double the Horn. After surviving the Southern Ocean and passing Cape Horn safely a month after Moitessier, and with more than 20,000 miles already under her keels, she began to break up within 1500 miles of home and had to be abandoned – a sad and needless outcome which Nicholas Gray describes with great sympathy.

The final man to double the Horn prior to the sixth and last moon landing on 7th December 1972 was Sir Chay Blyth aboard the 57ft *British Steel*. Unlike his five world-girdling predecessors he opted to head westwards into the prevailing winds. Leaving the UK in October 1970 he rounded the Horn on Christmas Eve, beat into the Roaring Forties for a further five months to round the Cape of Good Hope in May 1971, and finally made landfall in the Solent to a hero's welcome on 12th August after 292 days at sea.

Since then there have been many solo circumnavigations in ever-decreasing times, but nearly all with the underlying knowledge that, should the worst happen, the authorities can be alerted and help

summoned. Up to the 1970s, all who crossed oceans in small boats were as isolated as if they had been walking on the moon – in many ways more so.

Normally a book review should offer more than just a synopsis of its contents, but *Astronauts of Cape Horn* is not a normal book – with its comprehensive bibliography it opens a window onto a world of enterprise and endurance unknown to most modern cruisers. Its focus is relatively narrow and I hope that Nicholas Gray will follow up some of the stories – or others – in greater detail in future books. Meanwhile I can recommend *Astronauts of Cape Horn* without hesitation. A traditionally-bound hard-back complete with dust cover, it would make an excellent Christmas present – but only after buying a copy for yourself first.

Anne Hammick

PS: The contribution made by OCC member Roger Robinson should not be overlooked. In addition to drawing the chartlet of Cape Horn (though he tells me the publishers have printed an earlier, unfinished version) his archives provided several of the photographs.