

REVIEWS

THE NARROW DOG TRILOGY (NARROW DOG TO CARCASSONNE, NARROW DOG TO INDIAN RIVER, and NARROW DOG TO WIGAN PIER) – Terry Darlington. Published in soft covers by Bantam Books [www.randomhousebooks.com/imprints/] at £6.99, £9.99 and £8.99 respectively. 426, 432 and 354 130mm x 198mm pages, with a few sketch plans and line drawings but no photographs. ISBNs 978-0-5538-1669-3, 978-0-5538-1816-1 and 978-0-8575-0063-2.

Terry Darlington is a 'Marmite' writer – you either like his clipped, sometimes terse style or you don't. The same is true of his frequent quotations and allusions, while the fact that all three books tell of travels aboard a narrow-boat* called *Phyllis May* could be seen as a turn-off by some OCC members. However anyone who has ever had anything to do with boats will recognise a fellow spirit when, on page 309 of *Narrow Dog to Wigan Pier*, Terry Darlington writes: 'Pretending a problem isn't there, however monstrous, even when it is staring you in the face, is one of the most common and effective strategies in life. ... But the strategy never works on a boat. Ignore a rattle and a piece of your boat will tear itself off... Get something on the prop and it will stall you in a cross-current as the trip boat is coming for you'.

* Designed to travel England's 'narrow' canals as well as the wider ones, and originally to carry commercial cargoes, a typical narrow-boat is around 70ft (21.1m) LOA with a beam of just under 7ft (2.1m). Virtually flat underneath, they do not manoeuvre easily – and I speak from experience.

Narrow Dog to Carcassonne, first published in 2005, tells how Terry, his wife Monica, and Jim the (very reluctant) whippet, left their base at Stone in the English Midlands to make a circuit of the country's canals and rivers via London and Bristol ... after which they sat back and thought 'where next?' and decided on Carcassonne in the south of France for no better reason, apparently, than that they liked the name (one gets the feeling that Terry makes a lot of decisions for reasons like this). They're experienced narrow-boaters and not crazy, so arrange back-up to make the Channel Crossing – possibly the only narrow-boat to have done this, as the standard method is to ship by ferry – after which they visit Belgium and Paris, have an exciting time on the River Rhône, and eventually make it to Carcassonne – or as close as a canal-boat can to this ancient town.

This all could become a somewhat boring account of canals, locks and glimpsed towns were it not for Terry's eye for detail and oddball

humour (quite frequently at himself). It also transpires that he speaks fluent French, which may not always be obvious to those discussing him and the *Phyllis May* in his presence.

No such opportunities in *Narrow Dog to Indian River*, published in 2009. *Narrow Dog to Carcassonne* having been a somewhat unexpected success to author and publisher alike, he and Monica (Jim is not consulted) are encouraged to spread their wings and take *Phyllis May* to the US. Even they realise the Atlantic might be a bit much for her, so have her shipped to the Chesapeake and follow the Intracoastal Waterway south through Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia and across Florida. One can foresee Terry having quite a party with those southern ladies, and he does. Just occasionally the writing seems a little laboured and one imagines him scratching his head and wondering how to fill the next chapter, but never for very long. Few narrow-boats can ever have enjoyed a dolphin escort.

Narrow Dog to Wigan Pier, from 2013, is sometimes a little darker in tone. Ostensibly it describes first a trip up England's western canals from Stoke to Tewitfield – as far north as a narrow-boat can get, basically – and then a circuit around the centre of the country. But it is in a new boat, *Phyllis May II*, after her predecessor is lost in a yard fire, and the writing is interspersed with large chunks of autobiography and smaller chunks of philosophy. Both are interesting, not least because of Terry's considerable intelligence and distinctly off-the-wall view of the world. He tells us that he doesn't plan to write another book, and though I'm sure he could, and it would probably sell well, I think he's wise to stop while he's ahead.

There are no photographs or other illustrations, though each book has a page or two of sketch maps at the beginning. Doubtless other narrow-boaters will follow the Darlington's routes on detailed waterways maps (and glean a great deal of useful information in the process), but those of us with nearly 2m draught have no reason to take life so seriously. For more detailed maps and photos visit their website at www.narrowdog.com – where you are also encouraged to buy Terry's books, of course.

A few pages at the end of each book are devoted to listing the quotations and allusions mentioned in the first paragraph of this review. I regretted not knowing this until I reached the end of *Narrow Dog to Carcassonne*, though felt cheered at having recognised quite a few. Now I tend to check the unfamiliar as I go along. Terry Darlington has a degree in English from Oxford University, and as his syllabus is unlikely to have extended from William Langland to Allen Ginsberg one can only conclude that he also enjoys reading.

In summary? Well I really enjoyed all three books, and so did the people I lent them to. I can't promise that you will, but unless you have no sense of humour at all there has to be a very good chance...

Anne Hammick

~~~~~

**RACUNDRA'S THIRD CRUISE – Arthur Ransome. Edited and compiled by Brian Hammett. First published by Fernhurst Books [<https://fernhurstbooks.com/>] in 2002, this edition in soft covers published 2018. 128 235mm x 150mm pages illustrated with original photographs. ISBN 978-1-9121-7711-0.**

Arthur Ransome has a lot to answer for. Many a ten year old, including this reviewer, went on to a life of nautical pursuits after reading *Swallows and Amazons* and its 11 sequels about the adventures of the fictional Walker family and their friends, the Blackett sisters.

It wasn't until much later that I came across *Racundra's First Cruise* – Ransome's account of his introduction to *Racundra* and her inaugural cruise from Riga, where he had her built, to Helsinki, in August and September of 1922. It was much later still that I discovered what an interesting character was Arthur Ransome. A man whose political views were of the left, who reputedly was the only British journalist permitted to remain in Moscow through the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath. Here was a man who had Lenin as a chess opponent, and who fell in love with and subsequently married Trotsky's personal secretary, Evgenia Shelepina. Indeed, once Ransome had obtained a divorce from his first wife, he was married to his beloved Evgenia by the British Consul in Riga. *Racundra's* third cruise in 1924 was their honeymoon.

Despite its title, *Racundra's Third Cruise* is much more than a 21st century version of a book by Ransome that he never had published. The first 80 pages is an account of the cruise itself, on inland waters from Riga up the Aa River (now called by its Latvian name the Lieupe). Editor Brian Hammett has combined Ransome's words with those contained in his diary and entries extracted from *Racundra's* log. The result is a fascinating insight into river cruising through a countryside suffering from the aftermath of a long and bitter civil war. Hammett calls the remaining 45 pages a 'prelude', containing lots of interesting background information about *Racundra's* earlier cruises, about Arthur and Evgenia, and about the boat herself, as well as more general insights into Baltic cruising life and times in the early 1920s.

Even at the age of ten I can remember being irked by the unreality and monotony of interactions between siblings aboard the *Swallow* and the *Amazon*, and other boats in later books. In my admittedly limited experience, no family I knew was that peaceable and civilised in the various stressful situations that occurred during their adventures. This, however, was more than compensated for by the skill with which Ransome's prose imparts the spiritual as well as physical pleasure of cruising in small boats in interesting places.

His description of real cruising experiences aboard *Racundra* did not suffer from this pacific limitation. Here is an extract from his diary of an incident recognisable to many in the cruising fraternity as 'cabin fever':

“The Cook says there is no point in living in *Racundra*, that only children are glad to live in a ship, that there is nothing to see, nothing to write about, and that she’s sick of wind and rain and living in a small cabin; that I grow worse with age, and that proper authors live at home and write books out of their heads.”

A charming idiosyncrasy that carried over to his later childrens’ books was to use nicknames for things and people. *Racundra*’s somewhat temperamental hot-bulb, kerosene-powered Swedish engine became ‘the little donkey’, Evginia the ‘Cook’, the old, experienced, nautical person who helped Ransome fit out *Racundra*, and who crewed on the first two cruises, ‘The Ancient Mariner’. On the second cruise a fourth crew member was a grass snake over three feet long called ‘Oureberes’, a mis-spelling of *ouroboros* – a mythical dragon that is depicted as swallowing its own tail and hence has no beginning or end. According to the The Ancient Mariner’s daughter, on cold nights Oureberes would sleep coiled around Evginia’s breasts.

Clearly, the Cook was an interesting character in her own right. She stood 6ft 3in tall, was secretary to the man who formed the Red Army that prevailed in the Russian civil war, was suspected by MI5 of smuggling diamonds out of Russia to finance the *Comintern* in Paris, but jumped ship near the end of the third cruise because two mischievous boys in a dugout canoe emerged from the river marshes to toss a mouse down the forward hatch. As Ransome puts it: ‘... the cruise is almost over. The Cook has gone and I am left a hero to face a raging lion in a mouse’s skin’.

Soon after the third cruise and tired of endless travel, Ransome settled in the Cumbrian Lake District. Short of cash, he sold *Racundra* to a young Adlard Coles for £220. It was from there Ransome wrote *Swallows and Amazons*, and the rest, as they say, is history. Ransome died in 1967. *Racundra* outlived him by ten years – late in her life she was rescued in a neglected state from Tangier harbour, was restored, and sailed across the Atlantic to eventually founder on a Venezuelan reef.

For the general cruising fraternity, this slim paperback is highly recommended as the kind of book to have on board in case of enforced idleness in a sheltered anchorage while waiting for inclement weather to pass. Although it describes a world long gone, it nails much that is important, enjoyable and interesting about the cruising life. For Ransome aficionados, it is a valuable addition to his hagiography.

Jeremy Firth (JWF)

~~~~~

IN BED WITH THE ATLANTIC – Kitiara Pascoe. Published in soft covers by Fernhurst Books [<https://fernhurstbooks.com/>] at

£11.99. 264 129mm x 198mm pages including eight of colour photos. ISBN 978-1-9121-7716-5

The subtitle of this book, '*A young woman battles anxiety to sail the Atlantic circuit*', could be slightly off-putting for a seasoned ocean sailor. Most OCC members have made several ocean crossings, and while testing situations of course can frighten anyone, does someone else's chronic anxiety make interesting reading? In this case yes, it does – because Kitiara Pascoe is an excellent writer with an eye for detail.

When her partner Alex buys an elderly and unloved Nicholson 32 to sail to the Caribbean, Kitiara battles with self-doubt, not least because her sailing experience is almost nil. In the past she had been plagued with periods of depression and panic attacks, so while she wants to experience the adventure of crossing an ocean, visiting tropical islands, and swimming in warm water, internal voices keep telling her 'I don't think I can do this'. A year-long refit for the boat, including fitting an Aries wind vane, reminds Kit of how little she knows. A steep learning curve is normal at the beginning of your first long cruise – it certainly was for this reviewer – but being reasonably confident and determined is essential.

Fortunately Alex is calm and competent, and Kit is surprised to find that she is seldom seasick, a major cause of deciding that sailing isn't for you. The young couple manage to cope with the various problems that invariably crop up on a shakedown cruise, and when *Berwick Maid* and her crew leave Falmouth for Spain, it's Kit's first night passage. The five-day crossing is bouncy and cold, and she's miserable until dolphins appear and play around the bow, an uplifting experience that we've all enjoyed. Arriving in La Coruña with force 6 and huge waves behind them, Kit is overwhelmed with relief. After cruising the *rías* they leave for Porto Santo, Madeira, the Canaries and a month-long crossing to Grenada. As her confidence grows and she relaxes, Kit finds herself enjoying the way of life that we are all so familiar with.

The book covers *Berwick Maid*'s three-year cruise – north up the island chain to St Martin, across the Caribbean Sea for a lengthy stay in Panama, and back to spend three months exploring the Bahamas (where the author becomes increasingly disillusioned by the high price of imported American food, and anchorages full of boats that arrive in the autumn and don't move for six months). Some well-researched historical background makes interesting reading at this point.

So *Berwick Maid* heads for home, and with a 27-day passage which includes a lightning storm, Kit has plenty of time to analyse her feelings. She comes to the realisation that it wasn't the bad weather that was the problem, it was her reaction to it – seeing it as a constant battle, instead of just dealing with it. She's beginning to feel at one with the sea. Another gale and an errant halyard twisted round the mast and forestay keeps the crew busy before landfall in Flores, followed by stops in São Jorge, where Kit gives a vivid description of bull running on the quay at

Velas, and a street festival which they enjoy in Terceira. With their return to the UK getting closer, Kit worries about getting back – will everything have changed while she hasn't? What she does in fact discover is that the whole world has opened up – suddenly things that had terrified her before the Atlantic circuit have become doable...

All in all a fairly standard cruise, with the exception of the detour to Panama and back again, but an interesting insight into how one young woman overcame her demons and discovered mental strength she never knew she had. This book could be very helpful to a potential crew member, probably female but not necessarily, who is frightened at the thought of what she's getting into and doubts her ability to cope. The strong message is, 'Yes, you can!'

Liz Hammick

(6226 words)