

PEOPLE OF THE SEA – James Wharram with Hanneke Boon. Published in robust soft covers by Lodestar Books [<https://lodestarbooks.com>] at £25.00. 288 216mm x 216mm pages, many bearing mono or colour photos, drawings or chartlets. ISBN 978-1-9072-0650-4

Despite starting conventionally with ‘I was born in 1928 in Manchester ...’ – *People of the Sea* is the autobiography of a very unconventional man. It remains largely chronological over the remaining 273 pages, but within those pages it contains much more than just an account of James Wharram’s life as the designer and populariser of the eponymous catamarans, or more correctly Polynesian double canoes, interesting though that alone would be.

James’s only previous book, *Two Girls, Two Catamarans*, published in 1968, told the story of his first Atlantic circuit in 1955/56 aboard the 23ft 5in *Tangaroa* – the first such voyage made by a multihull. It was the fact that he was accompanied by two young women that many found most memorable, however, and which threatened to eclipse his growing reputation as a designer over the following years. Incidentally, while he states several times that he always detected a certain hostility from the yachting establishment and particularly the yachting press, my strong suspicion is that this had less to do with having the ‘wrong’ background and accent and a lot more to do with envy! Here was this guy, living an alternative lifestyle and invariably accompanied by a group of attractive and obviously intelligent young women, while they spent their days in stuffy London offices...

Despite stating that ‘This book is not an account of sailing voyages, but one about my life as a designer’, as nearly all James’s voyages were made aboard vessels he had designed and built himself – albeit with the help of his largely female workforce – long passages do feature, generally followed by comments that they were good, fast, enjoyable etc. Not all James’s life has been sunshine, however, with occasions of deep personal tragedy and others of sheer terror, such as the near loss of the 63ft *Spirit of Gaia* in the Canaries.

It is clear that James has never allowed himself to forget that most Wharram catamarans are built by amateurs, doubtless some more amateur than others! For several decades it would have been hard to find a distant anchorage *without* a Wharram catamaran in it. Designed for home-building, for the impecunious they were often the passport to long-distance voyaging, but they have become rarer in recent decades. James’s philosophy of ultra-simple sailing – no refrigeration, no watermaker etc – which was relatively standard up to the 1980s, had become less common by the 1990s and would appeal to an ever-decreasing number of cruisers as the years passed. There is also the fact that multihulls tend not to be marina-friendly in terms of both manoeuvrability and cost, and all too many former anchorages have now been ‘developed’ to meet the needs of those who prefer to step straight ashore.

Despite Polynesian craft being his overriding interest – sparked by reading Éric de Bisschop’s *The Voyage of the Kaimiloa* in Manchester Central Library as a teenager – James makes discerning and practical comments about many traditional designs and construction methods. What materials were readily available? What were typical launch/recovery conditions? And above all, what would a vessel be used for? In many ways *People of the Sea* is a world tour of indigenous watercraft, nearly all of them based on the canoe-plus-outrigger or double canoe concept. James is certain that, together with simple rafts of buoyant materials, these were the first seagoing vessels ever built,

and it is hard to disagree with him. With his designer/builder's eye, he sees and interprets details sometimes missed by those from a more academic background.

The text is accompanied by a great many photographs, mostly full-page, though somewhat more informative captions would be welcome. A time-line of major events in James's life, and an index of his dozens of different designs with date, LOA etc, would also be a useful addition to future editions. (All his designs carry Polynesian or Maori names, frequently quite similar and, for the lay person, difficult to differentiate and remember). On the plus side are a number of very clear sequence drawings created by Hanneke, clearly a very talented artist and draughtswoman.

The final third of *People of the Sea* is largely devoted to *Spirit of Gaia's* five-year circumnavigation in the 1990s, made partly with the aim of participating in the 1995 Great Gathering of Canoes at Huahine, one of French Polynesia's Society Islands. Sadly this turned out to be a somewhat frustrating experience, marred by the apparent lack of interest of many of the local crews and the unfriendly 'us and them' attitude of the organisers. Fortunately the welcomes in New Zealand and, later, in Tikopia more than compensated, while *Spirit of Gaia* must be one of the larger vessels to have transited the world's two major canals propelled only by outboards. Though still active as a designer, James concludes the detailed narrative in 1998 on completion of their circumnavigation, with only a brief Epilogue covering the years since.

The entire book is very well-produced on robust matt paper with a stitched spine and flexible, matt-laminate (ie. wipe-clean) covers. Though large for the bookshelves aboard many boats, it should withstand the typically damp maritime atmosphere for many decades. All in all, *People of the Sea* is a fascinating and well-written book – though not the easiest to review – and one which I can recommend unequivocally to mono and multihull sailors alike. Part autobiography, part boat design and building manual, part philosophy of life, James has packed a great deal into his 93 years and, with the help of diaries, journals and not least Hanneke Boon, his companion of nearly 50 years, this book is a distillation of that experience.

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