

BOOK REVIEWS

GORDON BENNETT and the First Yacht Race Across the Atlantic – Sam Jefferson. Published in hard covers by Adlard Coles Nautical [www.adlardcoles.com] at £16. 99. 282 230mm x 140mm pages with eight pages of colour photos. ISBN 978-1-4729-1673-0

History is about the doings of interesting people. Gordon Bennett was so extraordinary there is an expletive, used in moments of massive frustration, which is nothing more than his name. He raced across the Atlantic in what today we would call a large, heavy, comfortable fully-equipped schooner soon after the end of the American Civil War.

This book, written in what can be called ‘the modern manner’, is aimed at a wide audience, so there is little technology and not much about the three yachts competing. There is not a vast amount about the race, but then getting data would be hard for the most enthusiastic researcher. And the author of this book certainly has dived into lots of archives. The paucity of technology is in part because Bennett led such an extraordinary if unedifying life that the author has not had much space to cover those aspects of the transatlantic race which would especially fascinate OCC members.

As a glimpse of New York life in the late 19th century this book is packed with delicious detail. Wealthy people had coachmen to take them to yet another evening of heavy drinking ... and take the half comatose semi-corpses home afterwards. Maybe we should revert to this method of avoiding drink driving charges. The wild crowd and the anti-hero of this book did not lack toughness or determination, as the race started in a freezing December. What the crews did not have, and needed, were safety harnesses. The loss of life was horrific.

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