

The Skipper's War: Dragon School, Oxford and the Great War

By Desmond Devitt

Skipper Lynam was an extraordinary sailor. Even today, with robust and reliable modern vessels, his voyages would be notable, but with his vessels leaking and as subject to breakages as all yachts of the time and with no engine or, at best, an unreliable one fit only for calms, they were extraordinary.

Though Jim Pitts, in assembling 'The Log of Blue Dragon III', says that his books 'are well known amongst cruising sailors', it seems worth, for those that are less familiar with them, introducing Skipper as a sailor first.

Skipper Lynam developed his love of the sea and sailing as a schoolboy at King William's College on the Isle of Man becoming, in time, a successful canoe sailor with one boat to race and another canoe yawl to cruise. But it is with the first Blue Dragon, completed in 1892 and 25' on deck, that we are first introduced to Skipper through his books. Lynam sailed (and occasionally towed) her from Oxford down the Thames 'and kept turning right until he got to Cape Wrath.' He enjoyed many cruises in the west of Scotland – and these were far from fair weather voyages. As a Headmaster of the Oxford Preparatory School (later the Dragon School) his time was limited, but he took every opportunity to cruise at Easter and over Christmas, continuing his morning bathing (later with frostbite as the consequence after padding round the snow-covered decks before swimming in Norway). Although occasionally single-handed he was generally accompanied by others – often school children or old Dragons.

His logs (with contributions from each of the crews) are an example to us all. They do (as still reflected in our instructions for the Journal) 'capture the experience and character of a particular cruise' with a clear picture of the crew emerging and with poems and fascinating insights into the people met – particularly in the then rarely visited Western Isles that Skipper so loved. They also (like all good logs) provide an unvarnished picture of his misadventures – as he writes 'however much to my discredit as Skipper they may have been'.

Blue Dragon II's 43' gave room for more crew and allowed him to venture to Orkney, Shetland and then to Norway and the North Cape winning the Challenge cup in 1914. Intriguingly she was taken South from Narvik to Stockholm by rail (all 43' by 10'4" with a draft of 5'10, tilted on her side to fit through the tunnels). She was sold during the war to a Norwegian neutral - regarded initially by the authorities in England as an 'Act Endangering the safety of the State'.

Blue Dragon III was purchased probably in 1918 and he continued voyaging, again much of it in Scotland, finally selling her, aged 78, in 1937. Lynam continued during this period to 'show the beauties of loch and fen and island on the west of Scotland to his young friends and to give them the best of times possible on his unhygienic yacht'.

For those interested only in the sailing 'The Skipper's War: Dragon School, Oxford and the Great War' by Desmond Devitt provides little insight - though it does carry some gems, describing, for example how Skipper took his responsibilities seriously, taking the helm on entering tricky harbours saying, 'I always like to run my own ship aground'.

But for those interested in the man, this book provides an extraordinary picture of Skipper reflected through the writing of old Dragons on service through the war of 1914-18. Skipper (he was known by all as this, rejecting the idea of being called Sir by his pupils) ran what was then a most unusual

school. Whilst achieving remarkable academic results, the boys (and girls, though there were fewer of them) had great freedom and independence, worked fewer hours and had longer holidays than other schools. Skipper disdained the idea that pupils should be subservient or show false respect to staff. He expected his teachers to be treated with the affection and irreverence of older brothers outside of the classroom whilst commanding the closest attention within.

This approach commanded great loyalty amongst Old Dragons for the school, its staff and for Skipper Lynam. As Rory Stewart in his introduction to the book says 'The letters home mirror the Skipper's insistence – rare in a Victorian school-master – that children should be openly affectionate to their parents'.

Much has been made of public school boys that went straight from school to the trenches, how their school shaped them to face the dangers and their stories were much reported 100 years later. But it is rare for their preparatory school to be mentioned - yet the Dragon School is an exception to this rule. It seems that old Dragons did not just face the dangers but also wrote about it revealingly – not only to their relatives but, through the school magazine - The Draconian, to their school friends and teachers.

The story that emerges, with chapters for each of the main theatres of war as well as reflections on the life of the school at the time, shows respect for the heroism, chivalry and matter-of-fact manner in which reports are made and would have been received at the time. It also recognises the divergent views of the horror and misery that also emerge to be reported in The Draconian magazine and celebrates the lives of so many cut short too early.

There are, of course, some extraordinary stories of courage as well as of the futility of war (for example in reflections from those involved in the Gallipoli campaign) but there is also humour, such as the description of the experiments with gas carried out in Oxford on themselves by Professor Haldane and his old Dragon son. And many of the reports are extraordinarily well-written demonstrating how their solid grounding in the Classics allowed the contributors to the Draconian to describe vividly the experience of being shelled or the minutiae of the daily existence in a trench.

What shines through is both an admirable academic excellence but also a humanity and love that the school and Skipper Lynam engendered. Those with any connection to the Dragon School will be fascinated to find out more about the person that so shaped the school, whilst those who have enjoyed the various published logs of the Blue Dragon will learn much about Skipper's humanity, his humour, his willingness to allow pupils the chance to follow their own interests and make their own mistakes as well as the affection that he gave and shared.

The Skipper's War: Dragon School, Oxford and the Great War by Desmond Devitt is available for loan from the library and is published by Scala Arts and Heritage Publications.

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