Seahorse
International Sailing

Issue 443 £5.80 US$

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JANUARY 2017
The official magazine of the Royal Ocean Racing Club

ISSN 0143-246X

Hard sailing habits

John Rousmaniere looks back at the world of Carleton Mitchell and a generation of sailors including Rod Stephens and Erroll Bruce who raised the ocean racing bar with hitherto unseen levels of intensity and application

One of the more fascinating and, I think, representative characters in yachting history is a London stockbroker, Richard T McMullen, who took up sailing in 1850 and fiercely stuck with it for 42 years on British and Irish waters. In his entertaining and instructive collection of narratives of his singlehanded and shorthanded cruises, *Down Channel*, McMullen described his evolution from a timid novice to a notably aggressive adventurer who accepted sailing's good and bad with equal satisfaction, and often joy. His language was no less forceful than his ambitions. He more than once referred to his 'hard sailing habits'. A long bash into a Force 8 blow was 'terrible but very grand'. And he likened the satisfactions of his style of yachting to 'the pleasure human nature has invariably found in successfully gathering roses off of thorns'.

We have all encountered at least one McMullen – a driven, self-disciplined, focused and perhaps slightly masochistic skipper willing, if not eager, to trade a bit of comfort for a weather gauge. Most of the good sailors I have known (including, I have to admit, myself) have had their 'hard sailing habits', and here I will say a little about three of them who were pioneers of modern ocean racing – Carleton Mitchell, Rod Stephens and Erroll Bruce. Although I sailed with only one of them, I am fortunate in having known and discussed the trials and value of long-distance racing with each of them, and to have read their writings, in which each man elaborated on his beliefs and expectations.

Mitch

Equally well known for his skills as a sailor and writer, Carleton Mitchell (1910-2007) first sailed as a boy in New Orleans, Louisiana. When Mitch (as his friends called him) was a boy and was asked what he wanted to do in life he announced, 'I want to sail and write about it.'

His dream survived college years in Ohio, mundane jobs in New York City during the Depression (for a while he sold women's underwear at Macy's), and a cruise in a leaky old ketch that nearly sank in the Gulf Stream. Teaching himself photography and developing an appealing writing style, he worked as a publicist in the Bahamas.

After war service in the US Navy's photography department, he bought a heavy ketch, *Malabar XII*, from the New England-based yacht designer John Alden, renamed her *Carib* and sailed her out to the West Indies. 'She went to windward like a haystack,' he recalled in an oral history at Mystic Seaport, in Connecticut, adding, 'She was about as fast as a lightship, and just about as safe.' His book (the first of seven) about the cruise, *Islands to Windward*,

introduced many readers to the Caribbean's charms around the time the first bareboat fleets were getting established there.

Living in Annapolis, Maryland, one of America's great sailing centres, Mitch contracted a fierce competitive urge that he described as follows in his book *Passage East*: 'From a lazy character who would just as soon loll in the cockpit watching Portuguese men-of-war sail through his lee, I became the wild-eyed type who laughs demoniacally as the lee rail disappears and looks around for something else to set... Yet now I pity the cruising man I used to be: you get more real sailing – more of the real feel of wind, and sea, and a boat – in a week of racing than in a year of cruising.'

In 1952 he raced a Philip Rhodes yawl, *Caribbee*, across the Atlantic, finishing first but losing out on corrected time to a small sloop, *Samuel Pepys*, sailed by a hard-pressing Royal Navy crew commanded by another of our trio of hard-pressing sailors, Erroll Bruce.

By then Mitch was hooked sufficiently to plan a dream yacht to race occasionally, cruise a lot, and live aboard often. He described this ideal boat as 'a small centreboard yawl, orthodox yet unorthodox, dedicated to the personal theory that it is possible to combine in one package speed, comfort and seaworthiness'. He named her *Finisterre* as a tribute to the independence he sought beyond land.

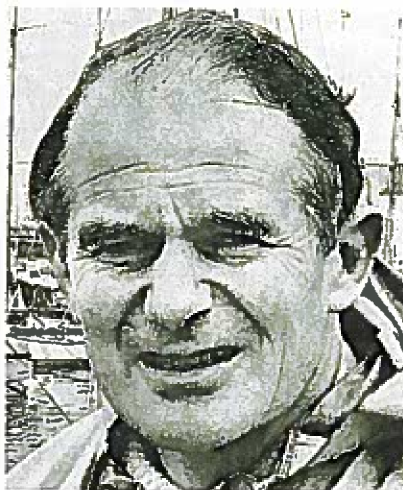
When the time came to approach a yacht designer, Mitchell remembered a happy experience he had enjoyed with the well-regarded rigging and construction expert Rod Stephens, and he went to Rod's and his brother Olin's firm, Sparkman & Stephens.

Beamy centreboarders were not then widely accepted for ocean sailing. Although they could carry a lot of sail in moderate conditions, their ultimate stability was problematic. But in time *Finisterre*'s design evolved into a 38ft6in LOA, 27ft6in LWL yawl with a then large 11ft3in beam and a hefty displacement of nearly 20,000lb.

The boat that Mitch called both 'an extraordinary little boat that could be driven very hard' and 'the fat little monster' was very hard to beat when the wind was up. And when the wind was down, to quote Olin Stephens, 'Her skipper and her crew maintained an almost magical degree of concentration to keep her moving.'

In 1956 *Finisterre* won the very competitive Southern Ocean Racing Circuit, off Florida and the Bahamas, and beat 88 other boats in the Newport Bermuda Race (which she would win twice more).

As *Finisterre* and her trophies and adventures became widely known through Mitch's magazine articles, the centreboard cruiser-racer type became very popular in the USA, where it was encouraged by the main rating rule, sponsored by the Cruising Club of America. In 1958 she beat 110 boats in the Newport Bermuda Race after a nearly 600-mile light-air, downwind duel against a larger centreboard yawl.



***Opposite*: *Dorade* and her successful crew photographed in 1931. A young Rod Stephens is seen (*front left*) alongside his slightly older brother Olin (*centre*) who was commissioned to design the new yawl by their father Roderick Sr – himself just 46 at the time. The pretty 52-footer will soon launch the most famous yacht design studio of all time – Sparkman & Stephens – while Rod will also play a notable part in the development of much of today's sailing equipment, at the same time as winning all of the world's great ocean races. Another great yachtsman who played a vital role in the evolution of offshore racing – Erroll Bruce (*above*)**

Returning to Newport, Mitchell jumped into the cockpit of the 12-Metre *Weatherly*, skippered by Arthur Knapp, as navigator in the America's Cup defender eliminations – an experience that led to an excellent book, *Summer of the Twelves*. (He also competed in offshore powerboat races as navigator for his essential *Finisterre* crew, Dick Bertram.)

In her six years of serious racing *Finisterre* never finished below third place in a major ocean race. When one of Mitchell's tougher competitors, Dick Nye, skipper of *Carina*, was asked how she did so well, he replied, 'For one thing, she's got everything. And he sails the hell out of her.'

Mitchell summarised his approach this way: 'My theory was that the time to get everything right is before you leave the dock. And then, once you leave the dock, to be able to drive the hell out of the boat and never have to worry about something carrying away. And if anything did let go on you, the spares were onboard with the know-how to put it back together.'

He added, 'On *Finisterre* we have a basic tenet to keep moving at maximum speed in the wind of the moment. There must be either a trim or a shift in sails every time there is a variation.'

To keep his sailors alert, Mitchell had a routine for the off-watch that included eye shades and ear plugs to facilitate sleep. This care paid off nicely in squalls that swept through the 1956 Bermuda race's final 100 miles. '*Finisterre* passed many of her competitors right there,' reported a watch captain, Bunny Rigg, 'rolling reefs in and out and changing headsails no fewer than 20 times with the fluctuations of the breeze simply because she had a well-rested crew.' Of course, all this needed to be properly managed. Rigg praised Mitchell's 'good admiralship'.

Finisterre's crew, like those of other moderate-sized racing boats, was amateur with the exception of a professional who cooked and did maintenance. One of *Carina*'s crew, Larry Huntington, has described this approach as 'friends sailing seriously with friends'.

There was more to *Finisterre* than racing, however. Mitchell estimated that for every mile she raced, she cruised at least 10. In 1956, after accepting his prizes in Bermuda, he and a small crew turned her bow east and across the Atlantic for a summer of cruising in the Med. 'It has been a phenomenal trip,' Mitchell wrote to Rod Stephens from Gibraltar. 'I came, basically, because each time I had gone sailing in *Finisterre* we had run out of water too soon. So I figured if I pointed the bow east from Bermuda, there would be plenty of water and plenty of sailing. Now I am not sure there was enough of either.'

Rod

'Good admiralship', 'sail her at the maximum', 'drive the hell out of a boat' and other maxims were not widely known or observed in big-boat sailing before around 1940; previously, most sailors took comfort in the old rule of thumb that the crew must pace both themselves and the boat. Carleton Mitchell and a few other sailors were guided to a new approach by a few authorities who were developing and publicising a new version of 'hard sailing habits'. The most influential of these gurus was Rod Stephens.

When Roderick Stephens Jr (1909-1995) first raced offshore, in the 1928 Bermuda Race, distance racing still had one foot in the cautious seamanship practised in the old gaff-rigged schooners. The culture shifted in the 1920s, when a distinctive ocean-going yacht appeared with the more easily handled Marconi/Bermudian rig and an amateur crew free to take a few chances on better performance using skills they had learnt in day-racing boats.

In 1930 Rod and his one-year-older brother, Olin, were commissioned by their loving father, Roderick Stephens Sr, to produce a 52ft family yawl – Olin to design and skipper it, and Rod to help build and rig it and serve as first mate. *Dorade* won a prize in the 1930 Bermuda Race and, the next year, started the 1931 Transatlantic Race to England with an amateur crew of seven, only one of whom (46-year-old Mr Stephens) was older than 25. The average age of the other six sailors was only 22. (When the Bermuda Race introduced a new prize for the top youthful crew for the 2016 race, it was named after the Stephens brothers.)

The Stephens boys and their friends, all small-boat racers, pushed *Dorade* across the Atlantic with what might be called ▷

seamanlike abandon to finish days ahead of the next, larger boat. Olin pressed hard as the captain, and the other force onboard was Rod, whom a shipmate called 'the hard-driving mate' who 'brought into play those personal forces which figured so prominently in *Dorade*'s success, namely speed, expert knowledge and a keen determination to keep the boat going at all costs'. 'Keen determination' defined Rod Stephens (when he took up windsurfing in his mid-60s Stephens enjoyed all the slips and tumbles without any sign of the usual humiliation, explaining, 'I like windsurfing, because it is difficult!').

Rod Stephens, said his frequent shipmate Halsey Herreshoff (grandson of Captain Nat Herreshoff), 'was the real pioneer of modern seamanship'. True pioneers have open minds. At a time when big-boat sailors habitually cleated sheets, Rod was impressed during the 1930 Bermuda Race when his shipmate, Arthur Knapp, a former Star Class World Champion, played the sails continuously. Rod later said in a Mystic Seaport oral history: 'It was a tremendous education because I don't think we ever cleated the sheet all the way from New London, where that race started, to Bermuda. His thing was, "Don't just cleat it and sit down."'

Olin would write in his autobiography, *All This and Sailing, Too*, 'Rod was the complete seaman in his understanding of the sea and boats and the relation between the two.' This understanding was not academic. Between 1928 and 1939, when he turned 30, Rod Stephens sailed 10 major long-distance races, including multiple sprints around Fastnet Rock and to Bermuda, and further long legs across the Atlantic. His boats won prizes in nine of those races.

He took a year off from ocean racing in 1937 while he served as rigger and the athletic deck boss on *Ranger*, the J-Class America's Cup winner commanded by another man of demanding and hard sailing habits, Harold S 'Mike' Vanderbilt, who at Rod's suggestion brought Arthur Knapp onboard as chief sailtrimmer.

Through his many friendships with American, British and European sailors, and through the articles he wrote for American and British magazines and the chapters he contributed to books, Rod spread his discoveries and ideas to many thousands of sailors. His touch was very firm. 'Rod was a wonderful teacher,' says one of his former shipmates, Harvey Loomis, 'but a formidable one – there was no compromising about the right way to do things, and he didn't mince words letting you know about it.' When shipmates referred to him, behind his back, as 'Rod God' or 'Tarzan', it was with mixed respect and also occasional frustration at his stubbornness.

The new or improved equipment that he developed, refined or publicised included the Dorade ventilator (which for the first time allowed for a dry, well-ventilated

IAN DEAR/PPL

***Above*: the groundbreaking Olin Stephens-designed *Dorade* is greeted at the US Navy Base in Honolulu having just won the 1936 Transpac Race. The same wooden yawl will go on to win the Transpac for a second time... 77 years later in 2013. Very special**

cabin), lifebelts (the ancestors of today's safety harness) and any number of new types of sail-handling gear.

After big genoa jibs first appeared in the late 1920s, followed a few years later by enormous parachute spinnakers, Stephens developed gear and methods for handling these intimidating sails. His notion about them was indicated by the title over one of his articles in the American sailing magazine *Yachting*: 'When in Doubt, Carry Your Spinnaker'. It began with this sentence: 'It's a tall order, and may sound a bit wild, but the advice given in the title to this article will probably get you there quicker if you have a good parachute spinnaker and trim it about right.'

One of the many sailors who were personally deeply influenced by Rod Stephens was Carleton Mitchell. They kept up a regular correspondence and a running conversation about boats and racing, with Mitch taking careful notes, for instance: 'Driving hard at sea, Rod consoles himself by "thinking what a boat can take". He looks at a piece of ¼in wire, and thinks of the strains imposed upon it, but also thinks what it would take to break that piece of wire. For there is "no real point of strain; the boat relaxes and gives in to the sea".

'Reason why cruising men should ocean race: it increases the efficiency for cruising: "a boat well fitted for ocean racing is 90-95 per cent ready for cruising".

'He also stressed the importance of racing around the buoys – it irons out details of rigging and handling your boat – with other boats close by for comparison, so when making long ocean races with nothing else in sight, the boat is still sailed at maximum efficiency.' And, above all, 'Rod feels that people should sail because of a "true love of the water".'

Commander Bruce

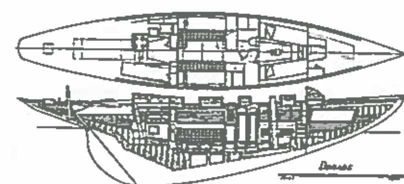
With such attentiveness, his superb reporting, his astonishing sailing successes and his deep concern for boats and human values, Carleton Mitchell, by the time of his third Bermuda Race in 1960, was widely regarded as one of sailing's most reliable commentators – and even a guru in the class of Rod Stephens himself.

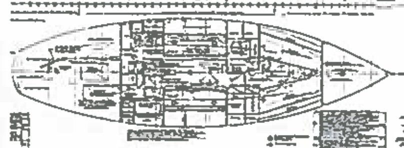
A third sailor in that category was Commander Erroll Bruce (1913-2004), who with the naval architect John Illingworth was one of the leading ocean-racing authorities in post-war Britain. A Royal Navy submariner, Bruce several times in the 1950s brought Royal Naval Sailing Association boats under 40ft across the pond to compete in Bermuda and Transatlantic Races. Like Mitchell and Stephens, Bruce was a superb sailor, had plenty of sea experience and was a prominent figure in the sport (he helped found the Whitbread Round the World Race). Another talented writer, he wrote several good books on ocean sailing, including the brilliantly titled *When the Crew Matter Most*, about the 1960 Bermuda Race. (Like the other titles mentioned in this article, it is available through the online used-book service AbeBooks.com).

Like Mitchell, Stephens and McMullen, Bruce did not regard sailing as a mere technical activity. 'Racing at sea can bring out the best qualities in people,' he wrote in his book *Deep Water Sailing*; 'it gives scope for adventure such as is hard to come by in any other sport. Each haul on the halyard or sheet, every cold douche of discomfort, each long night hour at the tiller, is for the good of the ship. She returns the offering ten-fold with the lasting joy of satisfaction that each individual gains from being part of a team that works together wholeheartedly.'

These qualities were prominent when I twice enjoyed the pleasure of Erroll Bruce's wholehearted presence. The first time, we were shipmates in a 1979 Cowes Week race on the Swan 47 *Toscana*, owned and commanded by my friend and American publisher Eric Swenson. Erroll

SPARKMAN & STEPHENS/PPL





Designed 25 years apart yet at first glance not dissimilar. However, the lines quickly reveal the contrast between the slender and deep drafted *Dorade* (*left*, and lines *top right*) and Carleton Mitchell's own chubby little centreboarder *Finisterre* (*above*, and lines *right*). Between them these two Sparkman & Stephens designs won virtually every major ocean race, winning several on multiple occasions

entertained us (and improved our performance) by identifying and instructing us to observe the various church steeples, large oaks and other landmarks that made up his son Peter's system for guiding yachts out of contrary Solent tidal currents.

A few weeks later I was in residence at Lymington and working in the offices of my English publisher, Nautical Publishing, where Erroll worked alongside my editor, Peter Johnson. My project was to research and begin writing a book, *Fastnet, Force 10*, about that year's stormy Fastnet Race. In discussions in the office and over long lunches at the Royal Lymington Yacht Club, Erroll identified issues and questions concerning that tragic race, while also providing a tactful critique of my approach to the book and to sailing. The book owes much to Erroll's thoughtful, humane comments about the dreadful and fatal incidents during the Fastnet storm.

In 1960 Erroll Bruce again sailed over to Newport, this time in the Illingworth-designed sloop *Belmore*, to race in a Bermuda fleet that had grown to 135 boats, including *Finisterre* and a large number of other beamy centreboard yawls inspired by her success. The day before the start Carleton Mitchell led Bruce on a detailed tour of *Finisterre* and answered his questions about the boat and the race. Recalled Bruce, 'His masterly handling of each subject, and the preparation of his yacht, certainly made clear enough that *Finisterre* was the yacht we must beat to win,' he wrote in *When the Crew Matter Most*.

When a newspaper reporter quipped that Bruce seemed to be taking this mere sailboat race exceedingly seriously, Bruce replied, 'I have not come here just to eat the good food and see the pretty girls. My object is to win. Perhaps 134 other skippers have the same object, though.'

Asked what conditions he hoped to see, Bruce replied, 'Fog at the start with light headwinds; lots of squalls in the Gulf Stream, and a gale somewhere.'

He got most of his wishes. The first two days had light-air downwind sailing, with *Finisterre* and *Belmore* playing the gybing angles well enough to keep up with the larger boats. Beyond the Gulf Stream, the big fleet encountered 70kt micro-bursts and gales, with much damage and some near-capsizes when boats were caught aback by wild wind shifts. (The consequences are suggested by the sailors' response to a post-race questionnaire that asked, 'Which gear was most important?' The answer again and again was the word then used for safety harnesses: 'lifebelts' and sometimes 'lifebelts!!!')

Another preparation hawk, Bruce had made plans to have his well-trained crew rested and able to race at full capacity during the race's final days. 'It is my belief that the Bermuda Race is usually won during the third and fourth nights at sea, and it is often lost, particularly by young crews, from over-exuberance and exhaustion on the first two days.'

Well before the race he retained a skilled navigator to join *Belmore*'s six-man crew and relieve him of one time-consuming duty, allowing him to rest for the push to the finish. When the navigator came down ill before the race Bruce took over his job, which quickly wore him out.

The first blast of the gale knocked *Belmore* over more than 50°. 'Life at this time was not comfortable,' Bruce dryly looked back on hours of pumping. In time the breeze eased slightly and they set a deep-reefed mainsail. 'There never was a moment's doubt in my mind that this was the critical time of the race. The gale I had prayed for had arrived, and *Belmore* had come through it very well... Now she was glorying in it, when a few hours earlier she had been shivering and sometimes stopped, as if shocked by too violent a jolt. She was certain of herself, and her motion had a rhythm of confident power.'

When *Belmore* crossed the finish line Bruce shouted to the stake boat, 'What about the others?'

'There aren't any others' came the reply. 'You are second in the fleet, of course.' *Belmore* had passed 50 boats during the night and beaten a total of 100 larger boats to St David's Head – but still *Finisterre* had got away, taking *Belmore* by 25m 21s on corrected time.

Mitchell would report that, during the gale, *Finisterre*'s point of sail was 'full and by, never pinching, never running off, trying to keep maximum safe speed.' She never shortened down to storm canvas, never shivered to a stop. Erroll Bruce had no regrets: 'To be a better man at the game than Mitch is a high standard... To come within 25 minutes of *Finisterre* under such conditions was no failure.'

That was one of *Finisterre*'s last races. Carleton Mitchell gave up ocean racing at the peak of his remarkable success to take up cruising full-time. His legacy includes insights about our relationship with the sea. While racing across the Atlantic in *Caribbee*, Mitch wrote down the following thoughts about what he called 'the somewhat fantastic nature of ocean racing'. 'Here we are, nine men, driving a fragile complex of wood, metal and cloth through driving rain and building sea, 1,000 miles from the nearest harbour; no one to see or admire or applaud; no one to help if our temerity ends in disaster...

'Our attitude is not even wholly based on the competitive aspect of racing. It is that we all feel there is just one way to do things, one standard, one code, and we live up to it for our own satisfaction. We are driven by our own compulsions, each personal and secret, so nebulous we probably could not express them to our mates if we tried. But in our own way we are about as dedicated as it is possible for men to be.'

Woman or man, cruiser or racer, who can find fault with that? ❑

Season two for the Fast40+ and already a dozen-plus boats are enjoying grand prix racing with more boats joining for 2017. The TP52s have the excellent Super Series and the Fast40s have the One Ton Cup, so there are now two options for a team seeking pro-level competition plus some controlled development. One Ton Cup runner-up – the Ker40+ *Invictus* (*opposite*)

We've missed you

The One Ton Cup is historically one of the most important prizes in big boat racing. After a hiatus following the demise of the IOR One Tonners in the mid-1990s the trophy has now found a new spiritual home...

Nearly 100 years since Cowes last hosted the One Ton Cup in 1920, in September the Solent saw the return of the event, now raced in the IRC-based Fast40+ class. Peter Morton's powerful Carkeek 40 *Girls on Film* dominated the 2016 competition, much as she has largely dominated the first full season of racing for the emergent new fleet. But the competition is intensifying and a new 'Girls' is already in build.

Having secured the prestigious – and enormous – silver salver for the new fleet, originally titled the Coupe International du Cercle de la voile de Paris, we hope that such a sought-after trophy acts as a driver to broaden the international appeal of a very exciting new mid-sized offshore class.

In the heyday of the IOR it was not unusual to see 15 or more new boats built each year to contest this event… and those IOR One Tonners, brilliant boats for the time, were never averaging 20-25kt downwind. Reason enough to hope.

The next One Ton Cup will take place in Cowes in September 2017, followed by Cork in 2018 and Brittany in 2019. In 2017 we will also explore the idea of a future Fast40+ EuroCup – five events in the Med centrally based to limit cost.

Meanwhile, the 2016 One Ton Cup regatta did a nice job of showcasing the class; excellent racing over three days in a mixture of conditions and over a variety of courses allowed all the boats to have their moment in the sun. Seven different boats on the podium over the long weekend, with the overall winner decided in the final race of the series.

The Solent without doubt still offers some of the best racing waters in the world. The mix of wind and sea conditions and tidal situations is inevitably complicated and constantly changing, added to which land and cloud-driven windshifts and complex thermal effects are also introduced. There is never a dull or easy day of racing on the Solent and putting together a consistent series there remains among the toughest challenges in international racing.

PAUL WYETH

The Fast40+ has reignited enthusiasm to race in these waters, delivering exciting all-round performance and extremely tight, near one-design competition but without the constraints of a pure one-design. This format allows different designs to race one another evenly while still accommodating development.

A further bonus is that the Fast40+ has proved itself to be fully multi-purpose, intensely competitive inshore and very exciting offshore. Operating within the framework of IRC also allows this competitiveness to be extended to the widest range of inshore and offshore events – including all of the classic offshore races.

Last but not least, by allowing steady controlled development, as with the TP52s the class can 'move with the times' without having to completely reinvent itself, a stumbling block for many one-design classes that suddenly find themselves facing competition from the 'next best thing'.

For 2017 the fleet is looking strong with 15-20 boats expected for the One Ton Cup and a growing international flavour. New boats are emerging from New Zealand, Sweden and the Netherlands – all from different designers. Today I doubt there is a major design office anywhere without a Fast40+ proposal near to hand.

The class launched around an existing