

ALAN VILLIERS

VOYAGER OF THE WINDS

SECOND EDITION



**KATE
LANCE**

*Foreword by
Sir Robin
Knox-
Johnston*

*"Outstandingly researched
and beautifully written"*

MOUNTBATTEN MARITIME AWARD

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Kate Lance

With a foreword by
Sir Robin Knox-Johnston



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Cover image: Alan Villiers on the yard of the *Herzogin Cecilie* in 1928.
A. Villiers, P49857, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London



**MOUNTBATTEN
MARITIME
AWARD**

WINNER 2009

“For her truly illuminating biography of Alan Villiers, a complex and sometime difficult man who had an immense influence on the popular understanding of voyaging under sail. *Voyager of the Winds* is outstandingly researched and beautifully written as it unfurls the true character of this extraordinary seafarer.” *Awards Committee, Maritime Foundation*

“A delightful warts-and-all biography of one of the world's most notable chroniclers of seafaring life. A prickly perfectionist, Villiers made plenty of enemies but he also enjoyed the support and backing of many others. His memorial is still to be found in libraries all over the world ... This fine biography does him proud.” *Austmarine*

“Emphasising the vast differences between his published and private words, [Lance] writes more about his private life than he did in his autobiography, and speculates on the inner qualities of her subject. She is clear-eyed about his flaws and virtues ... The result is a book that draws in even a landlubber.” *The Age*

ALSO BY KATE LANCE

Redbill: From Pearls to Peace
Silver Highways

WRITING AS C. M. LANCE

The Turning Tide
Atomic Sea

*To Kit, Kathy and Peter,
with gratitude*

Contents

Foreword	i
Introduction	iii
1. HELL AND MELBOURNE	1
2. THIS WAS SAILING!	20
3. WHAT COULD A GIRL LIKE ME DO?	39
4. HE IS DEAD	57
5. DAPHNE AT SEA	76
6. APPRENTICE GIRL	95
7. AN EXQUISITE MOMENT	114
8. THERE CANNOT BE TWO VOYAGES SUCH AS THIS	135
9. ADRIFT IN ARABIA	155
10. AIRCRAFTWOMAN WILLS	179
11. THE TERRIFIC BUSINESS OF MOVING ARMIES	200
12. SAIL'S TIME IS UP	218
12. <i>MAYFLOWER AND MARCEL B</i>	237
14. RETURN TO CAPE HORN	254
15. VOYAGE INTO THE UNKNOWN	270
Acknowledgements	291
Biography	294
Appendix A	295
Appendix B	298
Notes	299
Bibliography	310
Books by Alan Villiers	312
Articles for National Geographic	314
Photo Credits	315
Index	320

Foreword

I think that anyone of my age group who had any interest in the sea knew of Alan Villiers. By the time I began my Merchant Navy apprenticeship in 1957, there were no square-rigged vessels left on the British registry, so real training in sail was no longer available to us. The Germans still ran the *Pamir* at the time, but there were no openings for British trainees, so we trained in modern motor ships for the main part. That same autumn the *Pamir* sank 500 miles from us in a storm in the north Atlantic, and apart from the Russians and the Japanese, sail training for Merchant Navy men ceased.

Perhaps it was the absence of opportunity that made sailing ships more romantic. Although we rarely saw one, we were still expected to know the various types of sailing vessels and be able to calculate their course from their lights and wind direction when we went up for our second mate's certificate examination at the end of our apprenticeships. There are not many books about the sailing of the square-riggers, so Alan Villiers' account of his voyage with the *Joseph Conrad* was part of a small library available to those of us who were curious.

It was when I went out east to sail between Bombay and all the ports to Basra and met up with the Arab dhows still in use at the time all over the Persian Gulf that I became aware of Villiers' book titled *Sons of Sinbad*. We frequently met these dhows, often showing no lights at night or a pathetically small oil lantern that was barely discernable, and with unreliable radar it kept us very alert on watch.

They still traded from the Persian Gulf to Pakistan and India, providing an alternative service to our four British cargo/passenger vessels, which were the main means of communication prior to the introduction of cheap air travel. Some could still be seen in Mombasa and Zanzibar, carrying on the trade that Villiers himself had seen before the Second World War. Often they were under power, but occasionally we would overtake one under sail – which was not always easy, as they had a good turn of speed.

It was to understand more about these beautiful-looking craft that I read Villiers' book and immediately got round to wondering how I could make a similar voyage from the Gulf to Zanzibar whilst the dhows

still operated. That led to thoughts of building one and sailing it home at the end of my contract. Having no knowledge of sailing in the UK – all my sailing had been in and around the Indian Ocean – I wrote to the only person I felt I could trust for sensible advice. Within three weeks, a long, handwritten letter arrived from Alan Villiers. A nice idea, he said, but there would be no market for such a craft in the UK, so far better to build a yacht and sail her home. I took heed and thus *Suhaili* was born. Although I did not sell her when I got her home, I have always been grateful for the advice given very freely to a young, unknown Merchant Navy officer by someone who had plenty of other things to occupy his time.

I wish that we had met. Our times as trustees of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich did not coincide, but Villiers does not pull punches when commenting on people there during his tenure. In his personal writings, he appears as irascible and impatient as I can sometimes be, and he was prepared to take risks, the way seamen will, and particularly when told by non-seafarers that they cannot do something. He had the best of it, sailing a square-rigger during the twilight of commercial sail, and before health and safety officials had begun to snuff out the character development that comes through using initiative and taking risks.

Kate Lance's extensive research, using Villiers' own journals and papers, will help those who did not know him to a better understanding of this remarkable man. Young people reading this book will realise that there was a time, not so long ago, when true adventure still existed – but you needed to be a man like Alan Villiers to take advantage of it.

Robin Knox-Johnston

Introduction

Alan Villiers was only in his mid-forties when he wrote his autobiography *The Set of the Sails*, but by then he had already lived a life that made it well worth reading. In 1920 he went to sea on square-riggers, but an accident forced him into life ashore as a journalist. At twenty-five he sailed again on a four-masted barque around Cape Horn: a thrilling race and a female stowaway made his book of the passage a best-seller.

A shocking death blighted his next voyage in 1929 but gave Villiers another memorable book. By the mid-1930s his writings, films and lectures had made him famous, but after the agonising failure of a love affair he set off for two years to sail around the globe in the exquisite full-rigged ship *Joseph Conrad*.

His public rationale was always the urgency of recording the fast-disappearing ways of sail: Villiers never mentioned the private depressions, loneliness and self-doubt that also drove him. He rarely questioned the racial and sexual stereotypes of his era, yet he lived amicably among people from all over the world in sometimes extreme privation.

Villiers at last found happiness in marriage at thirty-seven, then spent six arduous wartime years in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. Afterwards he became a media star of the 1950s and '60s, captained the *Mayflower II*, sailed movie ships for Hollywood and lectured internationally. He inspired ship-lovers world-wide to preserve their remaining historic vessels, and today his unique images enhance a renowned museum collection.

Oddly, despite further significant work and extensive travel, he never published an updated autobiography. This book is the first study of his life as a whole – the mythmaking, the achievements, and the consequences.

Alan Villiers was not simply a voyager. At a pivotal moment in maritime history he worked aloft as a seaman and abaft as a master, observing and recording an age-old body of wisdom. The result was an extraordinary memorial: to the greatest sailing ships ever launched and to the talented man who loved them.

Second Edition

This book won the Mountbatten Maritime Award in 2009, but it is now out of print and a digital version was not produced at the time. I have made some small corrections to this edition, added new images, updated text, and included more on Jeanne Day, female square-rigger sailors of the 1930s, and the mystery of Nancie Mackay.

For greater readability of the paperback version I have removed the superscript note numbers, but each reference is still listed in the endnotes by chapter, with a snippet of the text to which it refers.

Author's Note

Villiers' diaries contain outdated nomenclature, random British or American spelling and occasional errors. For authenticity and readability I have left quotations as they appear in the diaries, without indicating his variations by '[sic]' except in potentially confusing cases. However, an ellipsis '...', which means omitted text or a significant pause, is shown as '... [sic]' where Villiers himself has used it for significance. The other instances occurring in this book indicate text I have omitted for brevity, and appear simply as '...'.

1. HELL AND MELBOURNE

One moment I was working away, full of pleasurable thoughts. Next moment the rigging was flying past me, and a tar-covered wire hit me a grazing clout. I felt myself striking other rigging. Then the deck. It seemed to me, in a last instant of consciousness, that the deck was surprisingly soft. It was not the deck that was soft. It was I.

In a life of accidents and injuries and sudden shocks, none was to bring such a change of fortune to Alan Villiers, able seaman on the four-masted barque *Lawhill*, as the moment the vessel ran aground near Port Lincoln in 1921 and threw him from aloft. He was eighteen and feared he might never walk again.

He had always yearned to sail on the square-riggers, never accepting their days of glory were lost forever beyond the void of the Great War. In an era intoxicated with the new there were few enough sailing ships left working in the world – there were none for a half-crippled seaman.

Alan Villiers was a stoic, stubborn boy. He went home to Melbourne, forced himself back to his feet, and took a job on a grim little Bass Strait ketch. Then he tried the easier labour of steamships: he made one tedious voyage to Europe and loathed every moment.

He knew finally he would never become a master in deep-sea sail, and he could not bear to work in steam. His dream was over and he must leave the sea behind. He started again in Hobart, Tasmania, and talked his way into a newspaper job at the age of nineteen. It was 1923 and he believed the world of the wind ships was finished.



Villiers was correct. By 1923 one of the greatest periods of human ingenuity was coming to a close. From the days the world was flat and order spread at the point of a sword, sailing vessels had been the engines of civilisation. Only ships could fly (by grace of God), with parchments and news, perfumes and silk, weapons and gold, from port to far-flung port. Entire economies were driven by the species of tree a country could harvest for its fleets, and entire cultures knew

themselves in terms of those fleets.

Shaped by the physics of air and water, sculpted through centuries of cruel experience, wooden vessels reached their perfection in the clipper ships of the mid-nineteenth century. With their long slim hulls, dashing raked masts and cloudstorms of canvas, they were (to most minds) the finest creations of the age of sail.

They set speed records as they raced the year's first crop of fragrant China tea to England, or immigrants to Australia and wool bales home again. On one trip the terrified crew begged the master to reduce sail in a great storm: he famously replied, 'To Hell or Melbourne!'

Wood was part earth, part liquid, part breathing green life; perfectly at home within the flux of great waters. But the Chinese tell us whenever an element has reached its peak another is growing stronger quietly beneath; and even as wood mastered the seas, metal was being forged to take its place.

It was a good joke at first – floating metal! – but by the mid-nineteenth century iron ships had appeared with ingenious propellers and puny engines, and every year those engines became more powerful. Yet the sailing world adapted. Iron hulls were large and strong, and iron masts could carry canvas. God's wind needed no bunkers, and even the best steamships were no faster than the square-riggers.

But in 1869 the balance shifted forever when the Suez Canal was sliced between Africa and Arabia, and made voyages around the Cape of Good Hope a thing of the past: a thing of the past for steamers at any rate. The big wind ships could not negotiate the canal without costly towage and were forced to keep to their old highways of the Roaring Forties.

The postal lifelines between distant colonies shifted to steamships, and passengers began to prefer their reliable passages. Understandably, a trip through the tropics – no matter how fever-stricken – was a more attractive prospect than the gales and icebergs of southern seas.

Only one market remained open to the square-riggers – carriage of bulk goods from remote ports, where slow loading and lack of facilities made the tight schedules of steamers too expensive. They began to specialise in coal, saltpetre, ore, timber, grain and guano: filthy, labour-intensive cargoes.

In the late 1880s ship-building steel became available in quantity. It led to major advances in steam but also made possible the creation of a kind of wind-driven vessel that had never before been imagined: one of vast rigging and even vaster capacity, a massive four-masted warehouse that could be driven through even the roughest of waters.

To many, these vessels were simply industrialised horrors, lacking the grace and glamour of ‘real’ sailing ships; to others they were romantic anachronisms – surely any fool could see that the future belonged to steam? But the new square-riggers were surprisingly useful – crews were cheap and the market for bulk commodities booming – and shipowners were anything but fools. They commissioned over four hundred of those extraordinary vessels and worked them hard, until the First World War brought their epoch to an end.



1. Four-master Archibald Russell on Port Phillip, Victoria, 1920s.

By the Second World War just twenty or so of the giant four-masters were still afloat, taking grain to Europe from isolated ports in South Australia, the far Antipodes. The great wind ships had been an expression of the highest in human art and skill and intelligence but, like the dinosaurs, their day was done.



Alan John Villiers was born in Melbourne on 23 September 1903. He was the second of Annie (Anastasia) and Leon Villiers’ six children. His elder brother Noel was born in 1902, young Frank in 1906, Edith in 1907, Lionel in 1909 and Enid in 1912. Six babies in ten years – poor Annie! – but his mother is only an anxious shadow in Villiers’ memoirs; he never mentions her by name.

Leon was a gripman on the cable trams, once the marvel of old

Melbourne. They were propelled by metal cables running constantly in narrow tunnels beneath the road surface, between the tracks. The 'grip' was the device that reached through the slot in the side of the tunnel to grasp the moving cable, released by the gripman when the tram had to stop or coast, thrillingly, around corners.

Cable trams were quiet, cheap and very frequent, did not smell of oil or petrol, and glided, it was said, 'with a swan-like motion', along seventeen routes and more than 60 miles of track. Every small boy in Melbourne wanted to grow up to be a gripman: every small boy but Alan Villiers. He saw what happened to his father.

Beyond his long working hours, Leon was a tramways union leader and unsuccessful Labour parliamentary candidate for the seat of Waranga. He was also a passionate poet and writer. 'His poetry was about the bush and the strivings of man: the articles were to point the way to a better world,' said Villiers, who felt that his father was overloaded with 'a great deal of the donkey-work for a movement which, great as were its early aspirations, sometimes came regrettably short of carrying out its ideals.'

Leon was 'a tall square man with a high forehead and a black moustache'. Alan always remembered his 'doctrine of good citizenship – be resolute: give your ideas: go after peace of mind, gear down to simple things. Be not possessive or avaricious. Discard all shams. Love simple things.' Leon believed that education for the workers would lead inevitably to progress, and that his children must aspire to a better life: he trusted in The Future. He was appalled to discover that his son longed instead for The Past, and the labours of a common sailor.

He should hardly have been surprised. Alan wrote that his earliest memories were not of his own home but of a house on Spencer Street belonging to his Ballarat Irish aunts and uncles (from his mother's family) which had an amazing balcony – one from which the little boy could watch the square-rigged sailing ships along the Yarra River at the end of the street, and in Hobsons Bay off Port Melbourne and distant Williamstown.

The uncles at Spencer Street were gold prospectors, 'tall, brown, bearded men', who would take Alan with them to visit the docks, 'a very small boy trudging along beside some very large uncles in the shadow of a full-rigged ship'. Alan's father was of more reserved English stock: he liked ships well enough, but visits to the docks were opportunities for lectures on geography and politics. He preferred camping in the bush to the sea, and tried to turn his son away from his growing passion.

When Alan was small, the family moved from Buncle Street, North Melbourne, to a tiny house near Flemington racecourse, in Collett Street, Kensington. Ships were still his greatest love, and he would walk to the docks and back – ‘only four or five miles’ – by himself or with his little brother Frank. He kept a secret book of his drawings of square-riggers.



2. Leon Villiers in 1909, aged 36. 3. Annie Villiers in her late thirties.

Once Leon brought home a gripman, an elderly sailor whose job was to talk Alan out of his passion for ships: instead, to Leon’s dismay, they enthused together for hours. Villiers later imagined the old man dreaming of Cape Horn gales, where ‘silent ships under a press of trade wind sail followed each other through sunlit days’, while he was ‘jammed in the driver’s pew of a cable tram’. Such a prospect filled him with horror.



Alan Villiers’ family always called him by his second name, John, or more usually ‘Jack’. His sister Edith Hazel was ‘Hazel’, brother Lionel was ‘Leal’, and Enid Marjorie became known as ‘Bill’.

To help support his family Alan had a paper round from the age of nine, starting at 5.30 in the morning. A boy in one of his children’s novels ‘was very quiet and paler than he should have been: a hard life had left its marks ... for eight years – six days a week, for two hours in

the early morning, he had trudged four miles throwing people's newspapers on their verandas and poking them beneath their door'. He needed the money for schoolbooks, and the few pennies left over went towards second-hand books on ships, which he read obsessively. He loved to go to Royal Park near the Melbourne Zoo to climb a favourite tree from which he could see the square-riggers. When he was nine, he and his little brother Frank were chased away by a park ranger on horseback, who flogged them with a stockwhip he kept for impounding stray cows.

'I can hear the creak of the saddle-leather now,' he wrote in an unpublished draft of his autobiography, 'thirty years afterwards and 12,000 miles away, and see the suffused blood grow on the ranger's saturnine face ... This incident befouled Royal Park for me. Never again did I climb the tree to look at ships.'

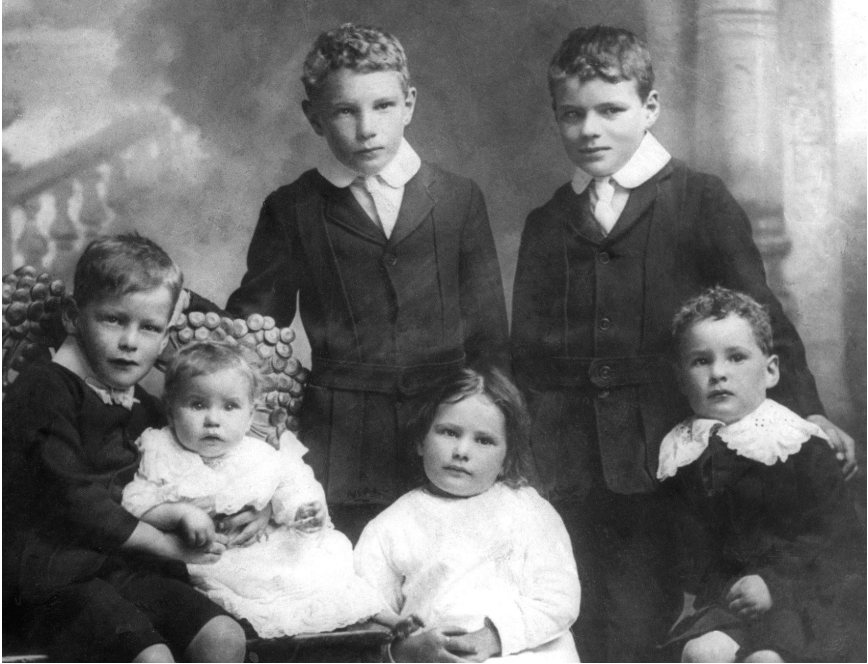
Villiers ran to his father to show him the welts and blood. Leon dashed to the park and confronted the ranger, who simply sat on his horse and, humiliatingly, ignored him. Leon was powerless. Alan wrote, 'That stinging stockwhip lashed deep & even today I find the sight of Melbourne depressing and dispiriting.'

At the age of eleven Alan tried to join the barque *Hippen* as an apprentice, but was dissuaded by the mate, who had signed on at ten. He was 'bewitched' by the five-year-old daughter of the captain of the Norwegian barque *Asmund*, a white-blond angel 'as remote from humdrum everyday life as the lovely ship she sailed in, and the great man her father who sailed the ship'.

But now, in the years of the First World War, *Hippen* and *Asmund* sailed without him, and both went missing. Villiers does not clarify whether storms or German submarines were the reason, but U-boats certainly had as little mercy for graceful square-riggers as for warships.

When Alan was twelve he started work with his older brother Noel in the long summer holidays at the glass-bottle factory in Spotswood, on the Yarra River leading to the docks. It was hot and hellish, with much night work; but square-riggers towed past and that was compensation enough. (Sailing ships were rarely spoken of as 'being towed' – too passive a term, perhaps.)

He was a clever, adaptable boy, awarded a scholarship to continue at high school and hopefully go on to university. He toyed with the idea of joining the Royal Australian Navy but lost interest when he found out they no longer sailed their last full-rigged ship. In any case they did not want him.



4. From left, Frank (6), baby Enid, Noel (10), Hazel (5), Alan (9), Lionel (3), c. 1912.

Then, when Alan was only fourteen his childhood ended, and even the loss of the blonde angel from the *Asmund* could not have prepared him. His father went suddenly to hospital, was operated on for cancer, sewn up and sent home to die. He did within a week, on 10 April 1918, aged forty-five.

Leon Villiers was laid out in an open coffin in the front room, and Alan recalled 'his manuscripts, his *Songs of Labour and Love*, his poems of the Australian bush, now never to be revised. All his great hopes for his country and for us, his sons, were in that coffin too ...' But at the burial all he could think was, 'Oh God, now let me out of Melbourne! Let me go!'



Leon Villiers' own father Frank had also died young, before forty. His wife Catherine was left destitute, and of their four surviving children, the three youngest were committed to an orphanage as 'neglected' and fostered at various times. Leon may have glossed over the truth about his own past, with the result that Villiers would write incorrectly that

his grandmother had left Australia with her younger children and 'relatives at Warrnambool' had put the older ones in an orphanage.

The Labour movement was able to help establish widowed Annie in a small suburban grocery shop. Alan, respecting his father's wishes, stayed reluctantly at school for almost another year.

As in many Australian families of the time there may have been inter-denominational tensions – Leon was Protestant and Annie Irish Catholic. Alan and Noel identified themselves as Protestant, but after Leon's death the four younger children were raised as Catholics. (Edith Hazel changed her name to Hazel Mary, Enid had numerous children, and Lionel bitterly resented what he saw as an imposition.)

In late 1918 the deadly global pandemic of pneumonic influenza escaped quarantine in Australia and broke out in Sydney, Perth and Melbourne. Alan fell ill early in 1919, then the rest of his family also succumbed; Annie lost the shop. 'My mother went to work for a Jew in Flinders Lane, for she was handy with the needle. Brave soul! She worked hard there for years.'

Villiers wrote a number of varying accounts of what happened next, which present some interesting anomalies. The first version of his final year in Melbourne appeared in the 1937 book *Cruise of the Conrad*. When he wrote it he was deeply depressed: he had lost a woman he loved and a ship he loved even more, and the book is suffused with anguish, self-doubt and financial desperation.

In a chapter bitterly entitled 'Local Boy Makes Good', memories of the life he had fled sixteen years before came back to haunt him. He recalled losing his school cap and being humiliated 'time and again'. His widowed mother was too poor to replace the cap, so he worked at the glass factory to get the money. He would watch ships on the river, yearning desperately to escape, and finally – as simple as that – he did so.

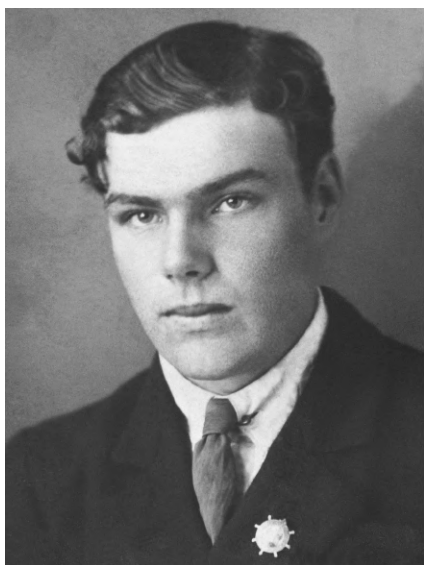
A second version appeared in a 1938 piece Villiers wrote for a twenty-fifth anniversary magazine for his high school, Essendon, which by then regarded him as its most eminent old boy. From February to August 1919 the school was used as an influenza hospital, but classes continued at another school in Wilson Street, Moonee Ponds.

He recalled, 'the school was taken over as a hospital, when the influenza epidemic was so bad, and we were all bundled off to a new school at Wilson Street, or somewhere ... it was about that time that the chance of a cadetship came in the barque *Rothesay Bay*, and I was off.'

The third telling is in his 1949 autobiography, *The Set of the Sails*. Here there was no mention of lost caps or Wilson Street, but instead a

strange tale of sexual humiliation. He wrote that his school had been closed and he was working in the glass factory until the official notification came that it was open again.

After months had passed Villiers suddenly realised his school had reopened but he had not been informed, when he saw a pretty blonde classmate, with a look of the *Asmund* angel, in uniform one morning on the train. He was filthy, just off the night shift and embarrassed to be recognised, and simply never returned to the school.



5. Alan Villiers, aged 16, late 1919 or early 1920. Note badge in shape of ship's wheel. 6. *The dream*: a painting of the barque *Rothesay Bay*. 7. *The reality*: a photograph of *Rothesay Bay*.

This published version of events puzzled a classmate, who wrote to him saying, 'I could have sworn you actually began your leaving certificate year and stuck it for one term at the school in which we were temporarily housed when ours was appropriated as an emergency hospital. I thought you started on Chemistry and Latin, as you thought you might take up Medicine, but also did History, as you were keen on it.'

The full story seems to be that he attended Wilson Street school for at least the first third of 1919, then dropped out and worked at the glass factory until the end of 1919. During the year he had an embarrassing meeting with a classmate he was attracted to. He started learning sailing skills halfway through 1919 with the Melbourne Ancient

Mariners Club at Albert Park Lake, and actually joined his first ship on 11 January 1920, according to his discharge certificate.

Minor discrepancies, certainly. Still, what is the significance of his tale that other students were informed that school had resumed, while he was not? There is an air of grievance about it – his close friend Fritz Egerton would chide him gently about his ‘inferiority complex’ – but it might have been just a story he told his mother to account for dropping out of school, one that expressed his sense of exclusion and became entangled in his memories.

What is undeniable is that in this frustrating period he yearned to ‘sail away’ from his bereavement, poverty, and emotional pain. His various tales express compulsion – just get away from the hell of Melbourne! – and anything and everything around him seemed to offer a justification.



Villiers needed a Board of Trade certificate to learn sailing with the Ancient Mariners. Dated June 1919, it states that he is fifteen, 5 feet, 10½ inches in height (he would grow a little taller), with fair complexion, fair hair and grey eyes. He had passed his vision tests and had an ‘eagle and flower’ on his left forearm: tellingly, at the tender age of fifteen, he had already committed himself to the stigma of a sailor’s tattoo.

The Ancient Mariners found a sailing ship willing to take him on as a cadet – *Rothsay Bay*, sailing between New Zealand and Australia. (Villiers pronounced the ship’s name crisply as ‘Roth’sy Bay’, as he did his own, ‘Vill’yers’ – two syllables, not three.)

In early 1920 sixteen-year-old Alan took the train to Adelaide, South Australia, and a steamer to the small port of Edithburgh. He felt guilt at leaving his struggling mother – it was true that one less child around would make it easier on her, but she wanted him to study as his father had wished, and he knew that his leaving for a sailor’s life would hurt her.

All mariners’ memoirs at this stage seem to retell the same scenes: the sad farewells, the looming ship, the awkward baggage, the unfriendly mate, the grim berth in the apprentices’ half-deck, the awful food, the inevitable seasickness: and Villiers’ story retells them too, except that from the moment he first saw the ‘very ordinary’ three-masted barque *Rothsay Bay* – all bluff bows and ugly grey paint – he discovered a great happiness. As if in a dream he recalled the vessel setting sail, all of the hands cheerfully drunk, a few of them having fled

from a much harder ship:

They ran along the yards, scorning the footropes, and they danced and sang, laughing to think themselves free of their great Cape Horner and in this handy, small Australian barque ... They went at everything with such a will that they never finished a chanty, and the chanties they sang were such as I had never read in any books ... What a going to sea!

Later, when his wretched seasickness had passed, standing at a masthead he thought, 'Spiritually I felt nearer the Creator of things on the high yards and astride the bowsprit-end than I had ever felt ashore. This was the life! Drive on good barque, I am where I want to be! This is contentment.'

Happiness from the first few ships he knew was to colour his view of the sea for life. He would bring all of his father Leon's passionate trust in the innate goodness of the working man to a vision of the ship as a near-perfect world, content in its firm, wise hierarchy, safe from the deceits and illusions of the shore.



Rothsay Bay, 'this handy, small Australian barque', was one of a greatly diminished fleet sailing southern coastal waters with timber, coal, fuel and provisions. She was a classic three-masted iron barque, built in 1877 in Glasgow; 187 feet long and 772 gross registered tons. We may know a little of *Rothsay Bay* from another of her kind, *Polly Woodside*, the 'prettiest barque ever built in Belfast', marooned today on the Yarra River in Melbourne beside the unlovely bluster of an exhibition centre.

Polly Woodside is an iron barque from 1885 of 678 gross tons. She was in the same Tasman Sea trade as *Rothsay Bay*, but the year after Villiers first went to sea she was turned into a coal hulk. In 1968 she was rescued by the National Trust of Australia and restored by a group of passionate volunteers. The World Ship Trust awarded *Polly Woodside* the International Maritime Heritage medal in 1988, placing her in the company of vessels such as *Cutty Sark* and *HMS Victory*.

But Melbourne seems to have forgotten it was once – and still is – one of the great port cities of the world, but few residents ever think of the docks now except in terms of real estate. What used to be the heart of the city – alive with odd vessels and mysterious people – is now a high-rise wasteland. The freighters (so ugly), the trawlers (so smelly), the tugs (so noisy) have been banished to less desirable environs, and today barely a soul in trendy Docklands would know a brig from a barquentine: though once any child in Melbourne could have told them.

In the days of merchant sail every kind of ship had its own terminology. Even the word 'ship' itself meant precisely a vessel with three masts and a bowsprit, carrying rectangular ('square') sails on *all* of the masts – a 'full-rigged ship'. A major innovation of the nineteenth century was a move from square sails on the rearmost mast to 'fore-and-aft' sails, set along the length of the vessel, which were more easily worked. Hence a two-masted full-rigged vessel was a 'brig', but with fore-and-aft on the rear it was a 'brigantine'. A three-masted full-rigger was a 'ship': with a single fore-and-aft mast it was a 'barque', with two it was a 'barquentine'.

Those carrying four masts were simply termed four-masted barques or ships. They were usually constructed of iron or steel to cope with the structural stresses. Four-masters could load far more cargo than three-masters but they were comparatively rare – out of a 1901 list of sailing vessels only 3 per cent had four masts. In total, amongst the thousands of square-riggers of that era, only 414 metal four-masters were ever built. They were the elite of the wind ships.

Polly Woodside is vast in a puzzling way that simply has no scale of comparison to modern eyes. Yet when likened to a four-masted barque, pretty *Polly Woodside* is as a dolphin might be to a whale.



Alan Villiers grew lean and sinewy, utterly content in his new life on the barque *Rothsaya Bay*. He learned of the true seaman's passion for neatness and cleanliness and well-organised gear, and the importance to ship stability – and survival – of precise cargo stowage. He liked both his young fellow cadets and the weathered ancients who ran the ship.

They sailed 1,000 tons of gypsum to Whangarei in New Zealand, unloaded it, and filled up with timber for Sydney. The passage was expected to take two weeks but poor weather turned it into two months. When they arrived their desperately ill captain went to hospital and the first mate, who had sailed the ship safely through atrocious conditions, was fired. So was Villiers, after only half a year at sea, but the first mate found him a berth in the barque *James Craig* – 'a lovely little vessel, as much a clipper as the *Rothsaya Bay* was a warehouse'.

James Craig had been launched as *Clan McLeod* from the Glasgow slips in 1874 and was still crewed by a number of Scots. An iron barque like *Polly Woodside*, 180 feet long and 671 gross tons, she was 'a lively, lovely, and highly responsive thoroughbred of a ship ... She tacked like a yacht

and ran like a greyhound’.

James Craig had already done time as a coal hulk in New Guinea but had returned to service for a firm of Tasmanian jam merchants. Her first port of call was Hobart in Tasmania, and Villiers ‘took a great liking to the clean southern city at the foot of Mt Wellington ... an attractive and cheerful spot, full of small ketches and schooners’.

In Hobart Alan also met a girl, Daphne Kaye Harris. In the little notebook he kept at this time, in a different, childlike handwriting, are the words ‘D. Harris, 193 Davey St Hobart’. He liked Daphne enough to send her the following Christmas a copy of a posthumously published booklet of his father’s poetry, *The Changing Year and Other Verses*.

James Craig loaded timber for South Australia and battled the Southern Ocean for a month to get it there. In Port Adelaide Villiers saw a four-masted steel barque, the first he had ever seen, registered to an unknown port named Mariehamn – ‘a massive ship, manned by young fellows with white hair and pale yellow eyebrows’. The barque flew a flag with a blue cross on a white background, that of newly independent Finland.

‘The little *Craig* tramped pleasantly around the Tasman Sea for several voyages,’ wrote Villiers in *Set of the Sails*. ‘It seemed to me that the fo’c’sle of a happy sailing-ship at sea was one of the more pleasant abodes of labouring man, where the sailors of all nations had learned through the centuries to work and live amicably together. Here there was true democracy, true international co-operation.’

Then in December 1920, less than a year after Villiers had first gone to sea on *Rothsary Bay*, they sailed into Port Phillip with a cargo of New Zealand timber, and towed up the Yarra to find out that *James Craig* would sail no more. She was laid up in Hobart for four years, became a coal hulk in Recherche Bay in southern Tasmania, and in 1932 was beached in a storm and abandoned.

In 1949 Villiers wrote about *James Craig* in his autobiography, and passed on his memories of the ‘happy sailing-ship’ to a new generation of maritime enthusiasts. In 1972 volunteers from the Australian Heritage Fleet refloated *James Craig* and towed her to Hobart for repairs. In 1981 they took her to Sydney for an extraordinary job of rebuilding, and today she is a working excursion vessel. But *James Craig* and *Polly Woodside* were the lucky ones.

They could easily have gone the way of so many others: the way of *Rothsary Bay* perhaps. She was hulked in 1921 and dismantled in 1936; her remains dumped on an island near Auckland, unidentifiable among those of thirteen other vessels.



It was still just possible for a naive lad to dream of a career in sail when Alan Villiers first went to sea in 1920, although the path to ship's master was not easy. The first step was four years of apprenticeship at sea, followed by nautical academy to prepare for examinations for Second Mate. Next came more sea time, then another set of exams for First Mate, followed by at least a further year as a watch-keeping officer, and finally the test for Master's Certificate. Command was still not assured, either – many ships' mates were qualified masters hoping for a position.

By the early 1920s the cruel truth was emerging. Since the war, the world had an abundance of new steamer tonnage; the merchant fleets no longer needed sailing vessels. Not only the handy little iron barques had been superseded by steamships, but even the great steel four-masters were living on borrowed time.

Still, Villiers and his friends searched for another sailing ship. They had no wish to go in a 'Yankee' schooner – American ships were notorious for their casual brutality – or a 'Squarehead' (Scandinavian) cadet ship, which would have no need of apprentices. They went to Williamstown, the old port town at the mouth of the Yarra, to look over two four-masted steel barques loading bags of grain at the railway pier, *Bellands* and *Hougomont*.

Villiers thought that *Bellands* was the better option. She was 3,145 gross tons, five times the volume of *James Craig* or *Polly Woodside*, and had a 'Liverpool' deckhouse – a dry, central living quarters that would break the dangerous rush of seas on deck. Best of all, *Bellands* carried Jarvis brace-winchies to ease much of the heavy labour of taking-in and paying-out the braces, the wires that swung the yards to the best angle for the sails to catch the wind.

In January 1921 Villiers and several of his friends joined *Bellands*; Villiers as ordinary seaman at the good wage of £8 10s. per month. Their only quibble was that she was a 'lime-juicer,' a Limey: British ships were well-known for their scanty food and rigid class distinctions, so unlike the informality of the small barques.

Once they set sail, however, they found that work on the gigantic *Bellands* was little harder than that on *James Craig*: as well as the wonderful brace-winchies she had twenty-four crewmen and a donkey-engine to raise the anchor and the heavier sails. But soon disappointment arose: the ship's passage was not to be around Cape Horn as Villiers had assumed, but the slower route westwards to

England via the Great Australian Bight, the Indian Ocean and the Cape of Good Hope. They might enjoy thrilling sailing that way too, but to miss out on the classic Cape Horn voyage was bitter – for young Alan at least (the more experienced seamen sighed with relief).



8. (Left) Restored iron barque Polly Woodside (Belfast 1885) in Melbourne, 1989.

9. The 'limejuicer' Bellands, Villiers' first four-master.

Astonishingly, there was a young woman on board too, the first of those bizarre creatures Villiers would encounter throughout his life that simply refused to comprehend that a woman had no place at sea. She was the niece – or perhaps the 'niece' – of the captain and lived aft with him.

The crew ... did not care for the niece, who trod the poop haughtily and frowned upon the lot of us as if we were the scum of the earth ... She never spoke a word to any of the dwellers of the foc's'l throughout the voyage; the crew had a grudge against her that she wanted fool things done, at inappropriate moments, in order that she could photograph them. It rankled to have to come out in a broiling sun from a decent job of splicing or something and fool around aloft with a tops'l for a blessed girl to take a photograph; she was by no means popular, though I don't suppose that troubled her.

The captain's ship-handling was excessively cautious and he misjudged the trade winds, making the voyage longer than necessary. That was bad enough, but worst of all he had carelessly neglected to replenish the stores of tobacco before leaving port. The sailors were in despair: hunger was one thing, but no tobacco for months was simple torture!

The captain's neglect had a more sinister side, however. In the mid-

Atlantic they saw a large sailing ship on fire in the distance. Instead of going to help as custom and law demanded, to the horror of the crew the mate and the captain insisted that the smoke was from a steamer, and sailed on.

Villiers later found out that the burning vessel, *Lysglimt*, was abandoned once *Bellands* had passed her by, but her lifeboats were rescued by another ship: the crew were unusually lucky. He had two shipmates sign his diary to witness the accuracy of the outraged account he wrote. When they got to England the three boys went to Lloyds to report the incident, but their story was discounted as an attempt to smear the captain.

By the time they reached St Nazaire, France, on 7 June 1921, Villiers was 'heartily sick' of *Bellands*. A few days before he had listed gloomily in his notebook:

149 days at sea - no sugar - no butter - no milk - no jam - no rice - no burgoo - no dried fruit - no lime juice! - no spuds - nothing at all!

Still, it was not the barque's fault, he later argued, for 'her tobaccoless voyage, her ham-fisted sailing, her food shortage, her long swelter in the doldrums', but that of poor officers: the demands of the First World War 'gave commands to some who were unfitted for them'.

What annoyed me was that the stupid privations practiced aboard, the whole unsatisfactory spirit of the ship, were so unnecessary. The voyage was, at any rate, a good object lesson in what not to do, if I ever became a sailing-ship captain myself, as I surely proposed to do.



On joining *Bellands* Villiers had noticed that the ship's bell had been cast with the Scots name 'Forteviot' but her lifeboats bore the painted-over words 'Werner Vinnen'; she clearly had some history behind her. He learned that she had been launched as *Forteviot* at Liverpool in 1891, then renamed *Werner Vinnen* when sold to German interests in 1910. In the early days of the First World War she was taken as a British war prize, became *Yawry* for a year, then was sold in 1916 and renamed *Bellands*.

The life of *Bellands* under different flags was far from unusual; sailing vessels from Britain made their way into many national fleets. But what was unusual was the sheer preponderance of British ships among the iron and steel four-masters: only 414 such vessels were ever built, and of those, an astonishing 349 – 84 per cent! – were launched from British

slipways. Even more surprising, two-thirds of those vessels came from a single region – Scotland’s River Clyde, with its shipyards from Glasgow to Greenock (see Appendix I, Figure 1). Despite their famous sailing fleets, France only ever built twenty-nine four-masters, and Germany eighteen; and in the whole of the prosperous United States only eight were ever launched (Figure 2).

The epoch of the metal four-masted vessels was brief too: it lasted for only half a century, from the 1875 Glasgow iron ship *County of Peebles* to the 1926 German steel barque *Padua*. Throughout the 1880s, ten to twenty four-masters per year were built – a mixture of iron and steel ships and barques. Then in 1889 the numbers of steel vessels exploded and barque rig was the only game in town. The peak arrived in 1892 when 67 four-masters were built, but the bubble collapsed just as suddenly as it began.

A brief recovery took place in 1902 with 17 four-masters, but the party was over by 1907 (Appendix I, Figure 3). After that, only the Germans would seek to build four-masters – seven superb steel barques – but no more Clydeside sailing giants would ever again be launched.



At St Nazaire, the crew were paid off and sent to England, a ‘home port’ for Commonwealth sailors; foreigners were forbidden to seek work in France. In Paris, Villiers wrote in his autobiography, ‘our score-odd of lusty seamen descended from the train from Nantes with a whoop and a wild exuberant surge ... Three of us from *James Craig* stayed together, and though we had our fling in Paris too, in due course we went on.’

This is the only hint Villiers ever gave that he might have enjoyed the life of a young sailor let loose in a big city. Just one year later James Joyce would publish *Ulysses* and revolutionise the frankness of the written word, but Villiers’ books were always as coy as a maiden aunt: in his 1949 autobiography he fails to mention the name of his first wife, the presence of a woman he loved on a major voyage, or even the very existence of his second wife and three children.

The young sailors reached London on 12 June, and again started searching for a ship. They stayed for a while at a friend’s house in Golders Green and would walk nine miles to the docks and back every day: ‘The summer of 1921 was hot and glorious in England, and each morning as we strode across the Hampstead Heath the great metropolis looked wonderful and romantic, spread out before us.’

The boys found lodging and potential work on a four-masted iron

barque named *Omega*, but could not sign on because a coal strike prevented her loading. 'The summer months of 1921 continued warm and pleasant until there was a serious drought in London,' recalled Villiers. Finally a shipmate suggested that Villiers go back to France to seek work on a vessel named *Lancing*, and 'a couple of weeks later I slipped ashore quietly by night from a little weekly steamer at the port of Nantes ... in the early autumn of 1921'.

There then followed wonderful adventures with a sailor who travelled with him, a Finn nicknamed *Lusitania* – 'twenty-six, dark, lean, lithe ... a very strange young man ... His features were sharp and determined, and there was a fierce glow in his dark eyes'. But they could locate neither the elusive *Lancing* nor even any working square-rigger. All they found were 'lovely big barques, ships and four-masted barques ... moored in dejection together in tiers along a canal'. They sheltered for 'weeks and weeks' on one of the ships with other illegal foreign sailors, then decided to walk south to Bordeaux, a distance of around 180 miles:

The weather continued fine; the days were long, and each worth while for its own sake. The sun rose and we washed in streams, and the birds sang and the countryside was lovely ... To roll in a blanket with the sweet smell of hedges in my nostrils and the clear stars above, after a long day's tramp, was very satisfying so long as we were not hungry ... it took us about ten days, as far as I remember, to reach Bordeaux.

There Villiers found *Lawhill*, the ship that would change everything. At first he and *Lusitania* were refused work, but they talked their way into jobs, accepted at last because *Lawhill* was undermanned. To his surprise, Villiers said, he was even signed on as able seaman, despite not having the sea time for that rating.

This all sounds perfectly reasonable, except that if they arrived after a long English summer at Nantes in autumn, starting the third week of September, by Villiers' own reckoning it must have been at least October before they reached Bordeaux.

Yet his discharge certificate states that he signed on to *Lawhill's* articles a scant five weeks after he landed at St Nazaire, on 7 June in *Bellands*. He joined *Lawhill* on 12 July 1921, in early summer, not autumn. He had his diaries and seaman's papers to check the dates, so how could he so poorly remember the timing? And more interestingly – why?

The obvious explanation is that he simply made a mistake. His book came twenty-six years after the event; on later occasions he would scold himself for slap-dash writing, and perhaps that that was all there

was to it. Yet in these memoirs he is lovingly precise about the seasons, the weather, the days spent travelling here or there.

Or perhaps the reason was that this bittersweet time loomed so large in his memory. He was only seventeen, after all. He had escaped from stifling Melbourne to a thrilling new life: one that would soon be struck down by the accident on *Lawhill*. It is not surprising he might recall every sunlit day as if it had been weeks. But no, the truth appears to be simply a case of authorial embroidery. Basil Greenhill, a friend of Villiers, wrote:

... while in London, looking for a berth in another sailing vessel, he called at Clarkson's, then famous as ship-brokers in the city, who looked after the affairs and interests of Scandinavian and Finnish ship-owners in Britain ... Clarkson's sent him to Bordeaux to join the Finnish four-masted barque Lawhill as an able seaman (the account of this development which Villiers wrote in his autobiography, The Set of the Sails, is somewhat more romantic).

Villiers' own diary notes the job and how he got to the ship:

Lawhill in Bordeaux, bound to Port Lincoln for orders (ballast) ... British & Foreign Wharf below Tower Bridge, SS Petrel for Bordeaux direct fare £7-0-0 ... Left wharf 2 pm Sat [actually a Sunday] July 10, fine hot day ... clear of Thames by 8.15. Next day warm, no wind. Arrived Bordeaux 10.10 am on Tuesday morning - Lawhill away to the devil down the river.

It may have taken him a long hard trek to get to *Lawhill* but he must have found her, as he signed on to the ship's articles the day he arrived. So his yarns of walking for ten days from Nantes, fast-talking his way into *Lawhill's* crew and his 'surprise' at being rated able seaman, were simply not true; although the enigmatic *Lusitania* apparently did exist.

Sadly, the long idyllic tramp through the French countryside was complete fantasy. While his father Leon loved camping in the bush above all, that was a pleasure young Alan never shared with him. What he wrote later may not have been his true experience, but perhaps it was what he might have wished it to be.

2. THIS WAS SAILING!

Lawhill was often called 'lucky *Lawhill*' and so she was to most people but Alan Villiers. Yet he was fast enough himself to hang nicknames on vessels: he called *Grace Harwar*, unfairly, a 'killer ship' for years. It was true that people died on her, but people died on square-riggers all the time. Even in everyday conditions they could all be killers: a giant metal shell tossing around in the most mutable of elements was never going to be a bastion of health and safety in the workplace.

Lawhill was a four-masted steel barque of 2,942 gross tons, launched at Dundee in the boom year for barques, 1892. For twelve years until 1911 her master was the ingenious Captain C.B. Jarvis, inventor of the labour-saving brace-winch. She did not carry royal yards above her topgallant sails ('bald-headed' rig), so had a squarish and inelegant appearance.

Just before the start of the First World War, *Lawhill* was bought by August Troberg, one of the major shipowners of Mariehamn, the capital of the Åland ('Or-lund') Islands, 6,400-odd granite specks in the Baltic Sea, midway between Sweden and Finland.

Since the thirteenth century Sweden had ruled Finland, including the Åland Islands, but after devastating Russian invasions in 1714, 1741 and 1808, Sweden finally ceded Finland to Russia. When the 1917 Russian Revolution began Finland grabbed the opportunity to declare its independence, but then suffered a civil war between communists and monarchists in the first half of 1918.

During this time, Finnish ships in foreign ports were regarded as stateless – unflagged and potentially unfinancial – and many were confiscated until their legal positions were clear. In June 1918 *Lawhill* was seized by the French government, rigged down and laid up for a year in Brest. But even that was lucky: it probably saved her from destruction in the last months of the First World War.

At the start of hostilities in August 1914 there were only 229 four-masted iron or steel vessels still existing worldwide (a few of the total of 414 had not yet been built, the rest had already been lost). By the end of the war, sixty-six of those 229 ships – 29 per cent – had been

destroyed in action: torpedoed, shelled, bombed or scuttled. Such a loss rate is appalling, even for merchant shipping in the ‘war to end all wars’, while the thought of sleek killer submarines stalking unarmed square-riggers is grotesque, like a time machine gone mad.

Still, in a period when medieval cathedrals were casually obliterated, there could be little concern for mere sailing ships – they were but a tiny fraction of the greater tragedy.

During the war another twenty-four metal four-masters were lost in the usual wrecks, collisions, strandings and disappearances, while a handful were converted to motorised tankers (with far handsomer lines than most).

Only 141 four-masters survived the conflict, including lucky *Lawhill* and two that were built in Germany during the war. Two more square-riggers would be launched in the 1920s, but they were the last of their kind.

Everyone knew they were finished: everyone but shrewd Gustaf Erikson.



9. The western harbour at Mariehamn in the thirties - *L'Avenir* at left, *Archibald Russell* at right.

Captain Gustaf Erikson had bought *Lawhill* in October 1917. He was one of the clever, tenacious Ålanders, whose farmlands were sprinkled over so many tiny islands that every household needed a boat, wrote Elis Karlsson, an Ålands sailor and author who met Villiers in the 1930s. The

Ålanders were fine seafarers who prospered enough as farmers, fishermen and timber traders to start building up their own fleets of sailing ships from those supplanted by steam.

Karlsson wrote beautifully of life in the Ålands: of green pines, grey lichens, stony hills and dark red log houses. Winters of sleigh rides, fires and moonlit ice; springs of melting snow and pale green birches, and brief sweet summers of flowers, forest berries and haymaking.

At the start of the First World War, little Mariehamn was the port of registry of over seventy vessels, of which twenty-six were iron or steel square-riggers. In 1913, at the age of forty-nine, Gustaf Erikson – known as Gusta’ – had retired as a master mariner, and begun carefully building up his own fleet. When he bought *Lawhill* in 1917, he already owned a schooner, six barques and a full-rigged ship, the much-maligned *Grace Harwar*.

Erikson employed Ruben de Cloux as captain of *Lawhill* in 1919, and de Cloux sailed *Lawhill* on four successful voyages which were said to have been Erikson’s financial salvation. De Cloux had been born in 1884 and was married to Elis Karlsson’s sister – most Ålanders were related to each other – and was to become a good friend of Alan Villiers. They first met briefly in 1921 when Villiers joined *Lawhill* and de Cloux was handing command over to a different captain.

Erikson vessels were noted for their hiring of ‘boys’ as crew: teenagers were energetic, good-natured and well used to heavy work. When Villiers visited Mariehamn in 1933 he wrote, ‘It’s a hard life here: a Cape Horn voyage must be a holiday to a boy brought up on an Åland farm.’ Most European countries still required their merchant officers on steamers to have apprenticed in sail, so clever Gusta’ was even able to charge a lad’s family for the privilege of labouring on his square-riggers.

Erikson saw that the only expenses for these ships were stores and equipment – the vessels themselves were going cheap and could be sailed uninsured. If they survived at sea they could be worked until they no longer passed classification and their cargoes became uninsurable, then sold without sentiment to the breakers.

And while the rest of the world was rushing to embrace steam, Erikson just kept on buying three- and four-masted barques, until he had assembled the last windjammer merchant fleet that would ever exist.



Oddly, there is no convincing explanation for that word ‘windjammer’. It was said to be a non-nautical, landlubber’s name for square-riggers, but it was also supposed to be a steamer crew’s sneer at sailing-ship men, so it did have nautical usage after all. People who talked too much in the trucking or oilfields trades were called windjammers, as were circus musicians, who blew loud and fast into cornets, clarinets and trombones.

Some claimed it was because sailing ships had to ‘jam’ their yards tight against the backstays to drive into the wind. Villiers himself was infuriated by a coffee table book which said ‘they jammed themselves into the wind however hard it blew’. He wrote sharply, ‘Any vessel which jammed herself into the wind would stop.’

In fact, the earliest usage is from about 1870, meaning ‘horn player’. It comes from the German (or Dutch or Norwegian) words for wind and ‘moan, cry, or lament’. Applying the term to square-rigged vessels in general was rare before the First World War, when precise distinctions between rigging styles were important. But by the 1920s, with so few sailing vessels left afloat, ‘windjammer’ came to be used by landlubbers and sailors alike. Yet that was usage not rationale; and nothing so far explains why ‘windjammer’ came to mean ‘deepwater sailing ship’. But perhaps the sailors themselves can tell us.

Villiers recalled, ‘A score-odd notes are here, if you listen closely, if you listen carefully into the sullen great roaring ... there is the plaintive moaning at the rigging screws, each with a different note; the sighing through the slackened running gear; and the mad roar at the wet and powerful backstays’. And Elis Karlsson wrote, ‘the icy wind played the music of the square-rigged ships in their rigging, a music no square-rigged sailor ever forgets’.

That music was the wind’s lament in saxophone, cello and shimmering percussion: and the ship itself – the windjammer – was the soulful musician.



Villiers was astonished at the youth of the *Lawhill*’s crew – fifteen-, sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. Apart from the captain, mates, bosun and carpenter, there were only nineteen seamen ‘to work 2750 ton square rigger 14,000 miles in ballast! Can’t do it,’ he wrote gloomily in his diary. Still, he stayed. They loaded the ballast quickly then sailed:

Friday July 29 1.30 pm. Leave Bassens Pier Bordeaux, tow of tug Callus ... Dip ensign to ex Captain de Cloux who came to see us off. Drop the pick

[anchor] 11.30 pm off Verdun at mouth of Garonne.

To get that big ship to Australia with her small crew was not going to be a picnic for them, or anyone ... What was I letting myself in for? I very quickly found out. I was embarking upon the smartest piece of deep-sea sailing it has been my good fortune to enjoy.

He was charmed at the ease with which the young Ålanders took *Lawhill* to sea:

[T]he morning sunshine found us slipping gently along under every stitch we had - twenty-three sails - with as little fuss as if we had been an onion ketch bound for La Rochelle instead of a deep-water four-poster, outward bound towards Australia. Whew! So this is a Finnish ship, I thought.

When conditions worsened and *Lawhill* did not have enough sea room to manoeuvre near the Spanish coast, Villiers expected her to seek a safe anchorage. Instead, to his surprise, she was handled with great skill:

What, I thought, they aren't going to tack her, surely? ... Sprays were breaking over the huge wall of her weather side ... Tack her? That's just precisely what they were doing. Into the wind she came, as if she loved it, like a gigantic yacht - no trace of the clumsy windbag now ... This was sailing - sailing as it was meant to be ...

The work was hard but shared out fairly, Villiers wrote. The food was plentiful and the watches well organised. The barque was 'a masterpiece of labour-saving devices on deck and aloft', which Villiers credited to her captain of ten years before, Brace-Winch Jarvis.

Even though he was the only non-Scandinavian on board, Villiers mixed easily with the other crew, helping them with the English they needed to learn for their officer's certificates. He soon picked up some basic Swedish, which had remained the Ålands' language despite Finland's sovereignty. Although he did not know it then, he was gaining entry into a society normally closed to outsiders.

It took four weeks for *Lawhill* to get to the Equator, then the winds picked up and they passed the Cape of Good Hope forty-eight days after leaving Bordeaux. A few weeks later they were off Spencer Gulf in South Australia.

We had seen ice and the road had been rough and hard on the boys. The Lawhill was driven hard despite the smallness of the crew; but her master knew what he was doing. We blew out no sails. We had no accidents ... I was feeling very pleased ... I liked the big Lawhill and was well accepted aboard.

As the barque approached the scattered lights of Port Lincoln in the

dark, Villiers was aloft with several other sailors, stowing the fore lower topsail. Standing by at the anchor, the mate suddenly cried out in Swedish, 'I believe we sail ashore!', and let the anchor cable go with a roar.

And immediately, too, the forefoot of the big ship came up on the beach as she hit Australia with a gentle thump which quivered the masts and all the rigging. Caught off balance, working with two hands, I was pitched from the yard and hurtled to the deck.



10. Lawhill. Villiers fell from the fore lower topyard, i.e. the second yard up from the deck on the foremast.

Like a confident child, Villiers had never dreamed of the possibility of falling. The sailors carried him in a piece of old canvas to a bunk, then refloated the barque.

I have fitful memories of that long night, of waking in some dulled pain and hearing the wind in the rigging and the cries of the sailors, my shipmates, as they went about their work. I was past caring what happened to the ship, or for the moment, to me.

Still, he had been fortunate, his fall broken by the rigging, the damage relatively minor, he thought: 'a wrenched pelvis, some internal injuries, and a nasty jab in the left thigh where I had fallen on a ringbolt.' (An X-ray fifty years later showed he had actually broken his pelvis at this time.)

It was a few weeks before he could even walk again. In the meantime

the ship was sailed to Port Adelaide to load wheat for the return journey to Falmouth; there was no possibility Villiers would be going with it. He was paid off on 15 November 1921 and took an agonising train ride back to his family in Melbourne. Despite his injuries, three weeks later he signed on to a run-down little ketch named *Hawk*, which carried cargo to and from Tasmania across Bass Strait.

Hawk was more than fifty years old and undermanned. Villiers helped load her with tons of superphosphate and a deck cargo of inflammable benzine. To his horror the other hands calmly lit a firebox on the top of the volatile benzine to boil the billy, and the poor state of *Hawk's* lifeboat suddenly seemed irrelevant.

The weather worsened. The cargo shifted, the ketch leaked, the sails were rotten and everyone was seasick. After two days they reached Launceston and unloaded, then stacked timber for the return passage.

Villiers made one further unhappy voyage on *Hawk*, then left just before Christmas 1921. In January 1922 he worked for two weeks at Henderson's Motor Spring Works, then decided to try a berth on a steamer.

He joined the Seamen's Union and on 8 February 1922 signed on to a 3,121 ton cargo ship named *War Spray*. They went to Newcastle, loaded coal and took it to Geelong, went back to Newcastle, loaded more coal and took it to Melbourne. He hated it, left after a month, and never mentioned the ship in his writings.



Next came *Erriba*, a steamer of 3,345 gross tons run by the government's Commonwealth Line. She was a grey 'ugly lump' taking grain to Europe, and on 5 May 1922 Villiers signed on as able seaman. *Erriba's* capacity was not much more than *Lawhill's* but she needed twice as many men to run her.

They loaded wheat in South Australia then had a 'rotten' passage across the Indian Ocean. They stopped for two days in South Africa: 'Found Cape Town very interesting but remarkably foreign for a British possession,' wrote young Alan. *Erriba* spent a few days in the Canary Islands then made for Falmouth, arriving on 23 July 1922. They unloaded the grain and took on coal for French Somaliland.

In Djibouti Villiers noticed the large graceful local vessels, the dhows. Here he caught malaria, which would trouble him occasionally throughout his life. His nineteenth birthday came as they steamed back across the Indian Ocean, finally reaching Melbourne again on 24

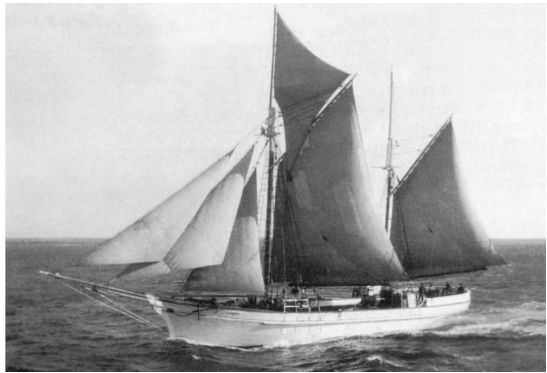
October 1922.

That was all he recorded in his diaries, but he recalled in his autobiography the monotony of the voyage – ‘a week of this was longer than a month of the *Lawhill*’s watches ... for sheer boredom the second and third mates’ jobs aboard that tramp must have been hard to equal.’

The master rarely appeared and the unionised seamen were truculent: ‘I had been brought up to put the ship first ... that sailors should have reasonable conditions and just rewards, all fair-minded men will agree. But to lose all sight of their duties in a great profession is to lose their place as honourable seafaring men.’

He wanted no part of a life on steamers. His *Lawhill* injuries made a return to the fo’c’sle on a sailing ship unlikely, and even remoter were the chances of becoming a master in sail – he had been shocked to see ports in England without a single square-rigger tied up at their wharves.

He decided it was time to give up his dream of sailing ships, to leave the sea and swallow the anchor. At the end of 1922 he caught the Bass Strait ferry to Launceston in Tasmania, then the train to the pleasant little city of Hobart, where the Cape Horners did not go.



11. Daphne Harris. 12. Tasmanian trading ketch *Hawk*.

Villiers had over £100 in pay from his *Erriba* voyage, so had funding enough for the move. He boarded at 37 Campbell Street, near the waterfront, and started work at a new factory rigging scaffolding. When that ended he took on a casual job in a jam factory.

In his autobiography he wrote that one day he noticed a prosperous-looking young man going into the newspaper office. A friend explained he was a reporter for the *Hobart Mercury*, and ‘it came to me almost with the suddenness of a bomb-burst that newspaper reporting was just the

thing that I could do.'

He approached the paper and discovered that before he could be a reporter he had to serve a three-year cadetship, and before that he had to first work twelve months in the proofreaders' room. There were no positions currently for readers and half a dozen hopefuls were lined up ahead of him.

He waited and waited for a vacancy. On 15 January 1923 he started at Zercho's Business College, to learn the typing and shorthand he would need as a reporter, 'with a group of merry Tasmanian girls whose studies were not always confined to the curriculum of the business school.'

Perhaps Hobart's attraction was not so much the lack of Cape Horners but the presence of Daphne Harris. They had become friends three years before but now things were apparently more complicated: the day he joined Zercho's he wrote in the back of his shorthand notebook, 'Met Daphne but unfortunately wasn't speaking to her.'

At last, Villiers' persistence won him a lowly job at the newspaper as a night copy-holder, reading aloud from manuscripts for the proofreader to compare and correct the proofs. He seemed destined to remain a copy-holder for years - 'the three youths ahead of me were smart young fellows, and the whole editorial staff was radiant with health.'

He graduated to revised proofs, corrected proofs and daytime work. He got to be a racing editor, providing tips for winning horses - he would select those with names like ships and his tips 'were as good as most'.

After six months or so he was becoming restless. Then in November 1923 five strange little vessels came into the wharves, named *Star I* to *Star V*. They were 'small, lithe steamers, with high flared bows and lovely lines ... in the bows of each was a small stubby gun'. They were followed later by a larger steamer, her decks 'a clutter of boilers and curious gear ... unlike any other steamer I had seen.'

The 'tough-looking' crew spoke Norwegian, which Villiers could follow with his *Lawhill* Swedish. He found out they were on an expedition to a new secret whaling ground in the Antarctic, and were short of men. Villiers thought the expedition had the makings of a great story, and signed on as a whaler's labourer, for £4 a month and a fraction of a farthing per barrel share in the oil: 'This was Opportunity, knocking loudly, and I was in.'

That was Villiers' version, anyway. The photographer Jack Cato wrote:

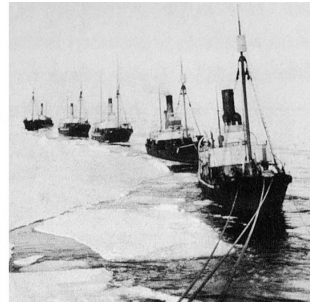
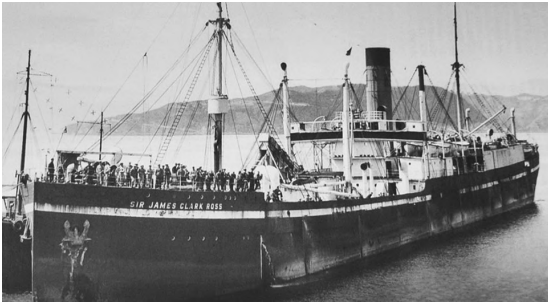
One of my friends was a young reporter on the *Hobart Mercury*, a quiet unassuming man who hated cities and loved the sea. Later the world knew him as Captain Alan Villiers.

His rounds as a reporter always included a call at the General Hospital for news of accidents. Here one day he heard that the captain of a ship at sea had wirelessly for an ambulance to meet them and take off two sailors injured during the voyage.

Villiers ... assumed that this was a secret expedition to the Antarctic for whales, by a fleet that had not touched port since leaving Europe. It turned out that he was entirely right; also that it was obvious they would require two men to take the place of the injured sailors ...

But Alan Villiers had to have pictures and he had never taken one in his life. He didn't know a lens from a hypo dish and I had just one hour to teach him. Obviously then it had to be the simplest camera ever made.

I got him a Kodak 'Brownie' box camera for 10/6, told him to point it at any subject full of snow and ice and water and press the lever to release the shutter, and wished him luck. Many months later when he returned, I developed a great mass of films and they were marvellous ... ideal under the conditions of that intense reflected light...



13. The factory ship, *Sir James Clark Ross*. 14. The five little whale chasers.

The mysterious Antarctic fascinated the public, but it was far from obvious the technology of slaughtering its whales would ever be of interest, and it was clever of Villiers to sense the possibilities.

He went to work on the mother ship, the 'inferentially comfortless' *Sir James Clark Ross*, an old cargo steamer that would 'fold up like a large tin can', should it be caught in the ice. His job was to clean coal holds to prepare them for whale oil – if they got any.

For some weeks pack-ice stopped them reaching the Ross Sea. When it broke up, they could not find a safe harbour, and without sheltered waters the flensers could not work beside the mother ship. One of the little 'chasers', *Star II*, disappeared one night and did not return.

They searched for her for days without luck and finally gave up hope: at that point the small ship turned up again. Finally the expedition anchored at an inlet, a split in the wall of the Great Ice Barrier:

[A] thousand miles of ice, like a fantastic elongation of the Dover cliffs all frozen and pitted with caves ... whole miles of the Barrier crumbled away without warning, and tumbled into the sea, a lovely cascade of shining blue-green ice which shimmered and scintillated as it fell.

Villiers yearned to go with the doctor and scientist on their brief expeditions ashore, but 'I have no chance of even asking to go. I am no one here, and I have no help and no privileges, no instruments and "no nothing". So be it ... I shall do quite well despite that and it does not damp my enthusiasm in the slightest degree,' he wrote earnestly in his diary.

The sights of Antarctica fascinated him, especially the changing light. Of one sunrise he wrote, 'I shall never lose the impression of it, although it is quite beyond the power of any useless pen to describe it.' In a list of the beauties of the wild Antarctic, one was 'the great ship's decks a picture of man's courageous industry among Nature's wastes,' followed by this grim description:

[R]ound the deck a hundred men toiling cutting blubber, feeding it to slicing machines whence endless chains like those of a bucket-dredge scooped the rashers and fed them to the square steel boilers ... the embryo of a well-formed whale ... lying pathetically on its back in a welter of its mother's and its cousins' blood ... Steam gushed from countless pipes; the chain-drive of the blubber-hauling machinery clanked; and the men, oil-skinned and heavy-booted, hacked with their flensers' knives at tons of creamy blubber.

'Courageous industry among Nature's wastes' was the conventional view, and Villiers would probably have been unusual for his time to see it as anything different, although even in those days some people did.

He wrote, 'I was happy in the Ross Sea. Indeed, I was extremely happy ... the whole thing was a grand adventure for me, and I revelled in it.' Nonetheless, it turned out to be a hard and meagre season, and soon it was over.

Sometimes the mirages in the inlet were almost frighteningly fantastic. The place began to get on the people's nerves. The smaller penguins had all gone. The whales had gone. The seals were gone, and even the few birds. The whole lifeless, threatening waste was like a continual nightmare, and the whale-ships' men daily became more savage and morose.



15. Villiers aged 22, after the Antarctic voyage - 1925 portrait against a studio backdrop, photographed by his friend Jack Cato.

They had killed little more than two hundred whales, when they had hoped for a thousand. After they sailed to New Zealand, Villiers cabled an account of the expedition back to Australia.

Villiers' wages and share of the take came to £28, barely enough to get him home again by steamer in April 1924, and far from any hoped-for profits. However, back in Tasmania fortune of another kind was waiting for him: for the first time in his life he had achieved minor fame.

His cabled account of the voyage had been sold around the world and

he quickly wrote fifteen articles that were syndicated throughout Australia and New Zealand, receiving £200 for them. Even better, he was appointed as a newspaper reporter without the customary three years' cadetship.

Villiers' friend Jack Cato took a remarkable portrait of him at around this time, posed against a studio backdrop of snowy mountains, wearing a fur cap and heavy coat. He is barely twenty-two: his eyes are calm and determined, his mouth vulnerable, with just a hint of humour.

He was certainly happy at this time. He loved the work of a junior reporter – police courts, hospitals, interviews, meetings – and he liked the old *Mercury* office: his friend Daphne Harris was on the staff too.

There are jocular asides in the social column of the *Mercury* in early December 1924, 'now that everything is out about our literary hero of "The Frozen South" and the lady of the commercial department', which mentions a presentation from the staff to Villiers 'on the eve of his marriage'.

Daphne and Alan married on 6 December 1924, when Villiers was twenty-one. He wrote breezily in his autobiography:

Within less than six months, with that two hundred pounds behind me, I was married and trying to settle down. I married a girl on the Mercury staff. She was a blonde. I liked blondes and never looked at a brunette or a redhead in those days. I suppose I still had some remnant of my childish admiration for the little Norwegian girl in the ship Asmund ... In the absence of Norwegians, a Tasmanian blonde would do very well.

He wrote this two decades later, when he had been happily married for eight years to a beautiful Australian brunette, Nancie Wills. Perhaps the casual tone was for Nancie's benefit.



The *Mercury* re-issued his whaling articles in a booklet, *To the Frozen South*. It was to lead to his first 'real book', Villiers wrote. In his autobiography, he tells of a sly Hobart lawyer who knew a British literary agent who would publish an expanded version of the booklet.

The lawyer persuaded Villiers to give him the rights over anything he might write about the whaling voyage, offering him half the book's earnings less expenses. He hastily agreed, and expanded the booklet – too quickly and carelessly, he later maintained.

The resulting book, *Whaling in the Frozen South*, was published in 1925 by Hurst & Blackett in Britain, and Bobbs-Merrill in America, and it sold well. Villiers' judgement was far too harsh: it is a striking and

important record of extraordinary experiences – naive, curious and observant – and unlike anything ever before written about the Antarctic.

Then Villiers was told by the lawyer he called ‘Mr Scrooge’ that he was obliged to submit the next two books he might write through them. Villiers wrote, ‘In sunny, pleasant Tasmania it was difficult to believe in Mr Shyster Scrooge, setting up office in the heart of Hobart, and pushing sealed messes of crafty verbiage across dusty tables to me’, but he signed, expending four pages of his autobiography on his indignant recounting of the tale. In 1970, however, Villiers said in an interview:

[T]o my great astonishment some optimistic person, a woman of all things, in some place called Indianapolis in Indiana wrote to me having seen these [whaling] articles ... and she said ‘Look, fella, how’s about doing a book for [inaudible] here in Indianapolis, Indiana?’ and so forth and so on. A book? Well, it was her idea, so I sat down and wrote a book.

It is difficult to reconcile an American woman (of all things) with the dodgy Hobart lawyers, but as the book’s American publisher, Bobbs-Merrill, was based in Indianapolis, perhaps this is how the U.S. edition came about. Among Villiers’ papers are the contracts with the Hobart lawyers and they are certainly unfair; indentures which gave the lawyers all rights over his book and also took half of any small author’s profits it might generate.

However, what probably annoyed Villiers most of all was that he had carelessly signed away the rights to his next two books, and his brother Frank had given him a very good idea for a story.



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