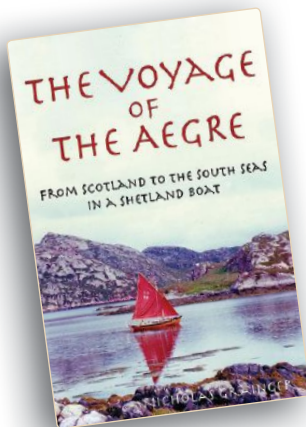


# REVIEW

PRODUCTS • BOOKS • VIDEOS • STUFF



## *The Voyage of the AEGRE*

*The Voyage of the AEGRE*, by Nicholas Grainger. Vinycomb Press, P.O. Box 2440, North Brighton, Victoria 3186, Australia. 271 pages, \$19.74.

Reviewed by Nic Compton

I first met Nick Grainger in the winter of 1998, when I was editor of *Classic Boat* magazine in the U.K. We had just published the story of his voyage in a 21' lug-rigged Shetland boat, 12,000 miles from Scotland to three-quarters of the way across the Pacific—at which point the boat capsized and he and his girlfriend had to navigate by the stars to get themselves and their boat back to land. It was an extraordinary tale, and I'm pleased to say we cleared the decks and gave it a full six pages in our Readers' Tales section.

After publication, Nick came down to the office to say hello and proved to be as engaging in person as on paper (or was it email?). I was in awe of his achievements, not least because his was exactly the type of small double-ended boat I loved. Stories of modest craft such as this undertaking remarkable adventures were exactly what I wanted to celebrate in the magazine, and his article pleased me more than any number of grand yacht restorations.

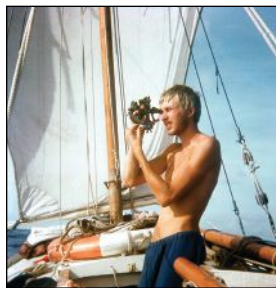
Twenty-five years later (and 50 years after the events he describes), Nick has finally written a book about the voyage,

and it turns out I completely underestimated him. Not only was the journey even more impressive than I remembered, but he turns out to be a fine writer, too.

Nick's story started in the summer of 1971. Newly qualified as a dispensing optician, he decided to take a summer job at John Ridgway's Adventure School in Scotland. Ridgway was a former British SAS officer who became famous when he rowed across the Atlantic with Chay Blyth in 1966 and subsequently set up one of the first outdoor adventure schools to include sailing in its curriculum. Nick lapped up the ethos of self-reliance that Ridgway advocated and learned to sail on the center's boats, which included a 16' wooden "fourteen"—the traditional open boats that have fished Scottish waters for generations.

After two summers working for Ridgway, he and Julie, the girlfriend who accompanied him on the Pacific voyage, bought their own Shetland boat: the 21' AEGRE,

which they had decked over by a local boat-builder, Bob McInnes. It was a rudimentary conversion, with no engine, and no electronics or electrics apart from a hand-held transistor radio with RDF antenna. The only navigation equipment they carried was a sextant, a ship's compass, a self-steering wind vane, and a 60-year-old antique log loaned to them by Bob. But they did fill the ends of the boat with polystyrene foam to



**The author Nick Grainger takes a noon sight under the square sail of THE AEGRE, a 21' Shetland boat he and his girlfriend sailed 12,000 miles.**



make her unsinkable, and they swapped the slate ballast for lead, to create more headroom belowdecks and to make her self-righting (in theory). They had two storm sails—a gaff main and a tiny jib—made out of flax for really bad weather. They didn't carry a liferaft in the belief that in an emergency AEGRE would be their liferaft (as it proved).

Their original plan was to sail along the west coast of Scotland to the south of England, as any sensible person planning their first cruise might do. But somewhere along the way (blame Ridgway) their ideas became more ambitious. After a single overnight sail to the nearby island of Lewis, their first significant trip was the 1,800 miles from Scourie in northwest Scotland to Madeira, which they sailed nonstop in 34 days. They got a complete pasting for the first week, sailing through five gales in eight days and crawling along at about three knots. The boat leaked, Julie was seasick, and both of them were soon exhausted by the four-hours-on and four-hours-off watch system.

Yet, remarkably, they weren't put off. If anything, the boat's resilience and their own synergy working together through adversity gave them the confidence to continue.

From Madeira they sailed to the Canaries, and then the 2,700 miles across the Atlantic to Barbados, which they completed in 43 days. Along the way, they set the storm gaff upside down as a square sail to catch the following breeze, clocking up 103 miles in one notable day, before being becalmed. As it became hotter, they experimented with nudism, though Nick soon discovered it



**Tom Edwardson built AEGRE in 1966 using 11, 1/2"-thick mahogany planks per side. The sheerstrakes were larch, and fastenings copper.**

**Becalmed mid-Atlantic, Nick went swimming to take this snapshot.**

wasn't wise to fish in the nude, after a close encounter with a man-o-war jellyfish, leading to the immortal line: "From personal experience, I can tell you that tentacles and testicles should never be mixed."

And that should have been that. They had achieved their grand adventure of sailing from Scotland to the Caribbean in a 21' boat. Except that a surprise awaited them in Barbados in the shape of a £500 check from Nick's father. Suddenly the idea of carrying on to the Pacific took shape. And so they romped across the Caribbean, covering the 1,200 miles to Panama in just 11 days (an AEGRE record). They then got a tow through the Panama Canal from none other than legendary solo sailor Tom Blackwell in his 56' ketch, ISLANDER.

From there it was 4,200 miles to the Marquesas. This long passage was of a whole different order compared with sailing across the Atlantic, and not only was the boat worn out but its crew was starting to feel the pressure from spending so much time at sea. Nick is candid about the mental stresses they experienced and how they overcame them.

The couple were welcomed with open arms in Tahiti, where they got work and refitted the boat, before setting off again two-and-a-half months later. The climax of the book comes just two days later when the boat was capsized in a storm west of Tahiti. The resilience the couple showed at this point is extraordinary. First, they had to right the boat (so much for being self-righting) and bail her out in a raging storm, while most of their possessions were swept into the sea. Then Nick fashioned an improvised storm anchor and a jury rig so they were able to set sail again. But their troubles were just beginning. Far from land, with no navigation equipment apart from a hand bearing compass, a nautical almanac, and Bob's faithful log, they worked out the course most likely to lead to land. Using crude bearings of stars to estimate their latitude and timing the sunrises and sunsets with a watch to calculate their longitude, they worked out where they thought they might be. But it was really just an educated guess, and if they got it wrong they would probably have starved to death.

After 31 days more and 1,600 miles at sea, surviving on half a tin of sardines per day between the two of them, they eventually found their way to the Samoa Islands.

Not only is this a compelling story, but Nick tells it with a relaxed, chatty style. The jacket tells us he's a "born storyteller"; he's had 50 years to hone this particular tale, and it shows. There's no doubt in my mind that this book will quickly join the library of classic survival stories, alongside tomes such as *Survive the Savage Sea*, by Dougal Robinson, and *117 Days Adrift*, by Maurice and Maralyn Bailey.

*Nic Compton is a regular contributor to WoodenBoat.*