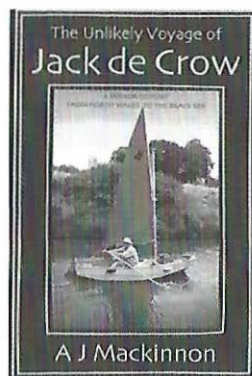


Book Reviews

Peter Last



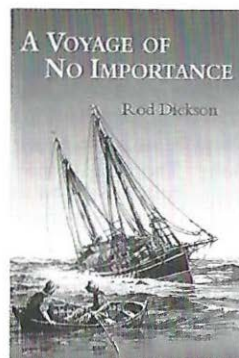
The Unlikely Voyage of Jack de Crow: A Mirror Odyssey from North Wales to the Black Sea. A J Mackinnon. Rendlesham Suffolk, 2002. Seafarer Books, ISBN 0 95381 805 5, obtained from Mostly Books, Mitcham. 356 pp, pb.

A Voyage of No Importance. Rod Dickson. Hesperian Press. Carlisle Western Australia, ISBN 0 85905 298 2. 116 pp, pb, obtained from Kimberley Bookshop, Broome.

Reviewed by Peter Last.

Sandy McKinnon's delightful book is an account of what seems at first sight to be a crazily implausible voyage of 3,000 nm from North Wales, by river, canal and across the English Channel, through France, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, unwillingly into Romania, and finally through the delta of the Danube to the Black Sea.

It's much more than that. Sandy McKinnon currently teaches English and drama at Geelong Grammar School. He clearly had an excellent education in Adelaide before adopting a peripatetic life that in September 1997 was resumed after spending several years teaching at Ellesmere College in Shropshire. Being obviously a man of character and epitomising English eccentricity, he acquired an old and unused Mirror dinghy from the school, and set off to take her to Gloucester. Once started, he simply kept going to his remote destination.



His account is beautifully written, marred only by an irritating inconsistency of tense, switching arbitrarily between present and past. He describes repeated accidents and trauma to the vessel and himself, enlivened by his own illustrations. In one reader it provoked frequent giggles and even guffaws from such episodes as using his topee hat as a bailer. By not allowing for tide, he managed to get lost in the English Channel, and had unwelcome close encounters with bulk carriers, which turned out to be anchored. 'I [wish] to deter anyone from attempting the same thing... or at least from approaching the possibility in the same cavalier and foolhardy manner that I did. I am not writing this with any sense of conceit... Having done the trip once, and been extraordinarily lucky, I would never attempt it again.' There were repeated difficulties in canals, which forced him to the exhausting and tedious process of portage, like the explorers of North American rivers.

Again and again he had the good fortune to encounter people able and willing to take him in and help him repair damage to the boat. 'One treasure I did find on the way was a wealth of fine hearts and courageous spirits. I discovered a strange world where, despite the daily assault on our fears by the media, people are still full of goodwill and take a positive delight in trusting each other; and it seems the best way to get there is by Mirror dinghy.'

There is often a lyrical quality in his prose, of which one example must suffice. 'I remember the run up to Oxford as a time of hard sailing

between banks where the dried sedges and rushes hissed like snakes before the wind's flail and the osiers turned their leaves in sweeping silver-green shadows; where the river [Thames] showed slate-dark catspaws ruffling and patting the steely brightness of the water as *Jack de Crow* surged and slackened, surged again, and steadied her way up the long reaches.'

Sandy McKinnon reveals a spiritual component of himself to complement his erudition, shown both in the epigraphs to each chapter and in the text. The voyage of *Jack de Crow* has inspired a wonderful book, strongly recommended for easy reading, vivid wit and its intrinsic interest.

There is a great contrast to *A Voyage of No Importance*, which is a grim story of shipwreck, murder and survival, expanded with tangential digressions. You may well ask how an author could include in an account of one of the great dinghy voyages of Australian maritime history newspaper cuttings of the 'Battle of the Dogger Bank' of 1904 between the Russian Imperial Navy and harmless British fishing trawlers in the North Sea. You must read it for yourself to find out.

Briefly, the pearling lugger *Henry* of 13 tons TM (38 ft x 12 ft x 6 ft) owned by Captain JM Johnston foundered close to Cape Voltaire in the Cambridge Gulf of NW Australia on 28 October 1920. She had no engine and a six-knot tide impaled her on a reef.

The pearling industry was deeply depressed by the Great War and the development of synthetic buttons. There were rumours of deposits of gold and silver on the Kimberley coast, and Captain Johnston wanted to find some. On Mary Island Aborigines had murdered two men, and a petty officer had gone missing from the survey vessel HMAS *Geranium*. It turned out that a crocodile took him. Broome police engaged Captain Johnston to deliver messages about the missing men to the Catholic Benedictine monks at the Drysdale River Mission. Then he would go prospecting, but he had no chance to begin.

After the wreck, the six men aboard the *Henry* got ashore in a newly built 12 ft dinghy with such stores as they could quickly grab. Mercifully there was a small spring of fresh



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water, but with the wet season imminent their position was desperate. They knew that the Drysdale River mission lugger was under repair in Broome. There was no pearling in the area and commercial fishing was far in the future. HMAS *Geranium* had long since left local waters. The dinghy could not accommodate them all, and they quarrelled over what was to be done. One man was a sea lawyer, who insisted that once ashore shipboard authority no longer existed. 'Captain Johnston agreed... but went on to explain that he owned the dinghy and the provisions, as well as being captain of the lugger, and as such it was in his power to take command of the situation.' The recalcitrants were obliged to accept that.

He sent Henry Scott and Lancelot Pascoe to row to the Presbyterian mission in Camden Sound, a direct distance of 120 nm, but they went much further than that. On arrival they found that the mission had no food to spare, and its lugger had gone to Broome for repairs. After two nights and a day and receiving a single loaf of bread, they resumed rowing, and on one day made only three nm against strong tidal currents. Scott had an infected foot, and could not walk. 'The tides in King Sound run at up to 10 knots... so they waited for the half ebb. When they did set off they rowed like demons to try to make it across to Meda Passage, but after rowing for four hours they had only traversed two miles. It was heartbreaking work but they had no option but to press on... When they attempted to round the

point to where they knew water existed, Pascoe had to get out of the dinghy with Scott still aboard. It was a supreme effort and one that finally met with success when the dinghy was at last hauled up on to the beach and the two men collapsed with relief.'

Boolgu Station was deserted, but mercifully its 22 ft open sailing boat was on the beach. After rowing for more than 250 nautical miles they had the luxury of sailing to the lighthouse at Cape Leveque. Here they obtained provisions and at once returned to Cape Voltaire, two months after leaving there.

Captain Johnston and Gordon Stanley welcomed them with huge relief, but Frank Bass and John Smith had departed. They constructed a primitive canoe and a coracle, before they set out to walk to one of the missions. They lost their boats in surf and dragged on until they were left with no garment between them but a hat. They antagonised some Aborigines, who frankly admitted spearing and clubbing them to death. A police patrol sent to arrest the murderers travelled 1,267 miles in 4½ months. For his part in the search for Bass and Smith, Henry Scott received from the WA Police £10 in compensation.

This is a well illustrated account of violence and travelling in what even today are dangerous waters, but which then were extremely remote and with very few white men in the area. It is thoroughly documented, and it is an extraordinary story of endurance. 50

Piping Shrike and a Smuggler in Bass Strait

Mike Fowler

We have received some e-mails from Mike Fowler, who has been undertaking a leisurely cruise with his partner Helen and Pita, the 'wonder dog'. As with the ongoing saga of Legs Eleven, we have space only for edited abstracts. The electronic address is VHS2218@sailmail.com, and, as in all such communications, any e-mails sent to them must be brief and with no attachments.

Received 8 June 2003 and subsequently

We were waiting to move on from Cooks Corner on the Freycinet Peninsula [Tasmania] to places N. The forecast for the morning was reasonable, but half a mile out from the bay the sea wasn't flat nor was the wind light. We tucked in two reefs in the main to motor-sail through Schouten Passage. Outside in the Tasman Sea the swell was southerly and the wind was moderate to fresh. We arrived at Bicheno in good time, to appreciate a flat anchorage, light winds, and the services of a purveyor of alcoholic drinks less than 400 metres from the dinghy ramp.

Bicheno has a lovely anchorage tucked inside the fishing boat mooring area (given the right conditions, which we had). We left there with a perfect forecast to take us to St. Helens and the BAR — the bar that is classified as dangerous (if you don't have local knowledge) in most conditions and especially so if there is an E to NE swell running). A bar for those who don't know is where a river runs out to meet the sea and where there can be shifting sands and rogue waves, both of which are difficult to predict. There is only one bar in Tasmania (St. Helen's), one (we think) in South Australia and heaps in NSW. So that at St. Helens was a new experience.

St. Helens Coastal Patrol will provide a lead boat from the bar to the wharf if requested, which is what we did. It was just as well because otherwise we would have missed the entrance. The bar that day had no swell at all. We crossed with about four feet beneath us and we followed the lead boat on a circuitous and meandering route to the wharf, which is protected from just about any sea action and sleep was easy... [On departing,] with a good forecast for weather and

swell on the bar, we were, much to our delight, escorted on the 6.5 nm run out to the bar. As we got closer to it a funny sound could be heard, faint at first — a bit like the sound of surf on a Hawaiian surfing beach.

'Local phenomenon', we thought, of sound being amplified and travelling on a nice day. Then, before us, viewed from a distance, was the entrance. The surf sounds were emanating from a wall of water crashing on to and over the bar. Nervous tremblings in nether regions were experienced at this point. The lead boat did not seem perturbed and proceeded to a point just inside the bar (that was as far as he was going today). There was a non-breaking section of bar after all, about 100 metres wide. The Coast Patrol advised us and Renee (who was in front of us) that now was the time to go as the swell had flattened (momentarily)! Renee led with us following about 100 metres behind.

As in all these situations Murphy entered the equation. A set of three magnificent swells (you could have won any surfing competition on them) arose between us and Renee. Although we had battened the boat down, a slight trepidation was felt as the first wave stood up in front of us well above our bow (our bow is about 5 feet above the water-line) ready to break — it didn't though. White knuckles all round as *Piping*



Mike and Helen.

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Shrike pointed her bow at the sky and her transom to the bottom and wiped off a lot of boat speed. The second and third swells were steeper and bigger and the same sequence followed with each swell knocking off more speed and steerage. Got there though!

The Coastal Patrol radioed that they were fairly impressed and the lads on *Renee* said that they could see most of our keel...

[*Piping Shrike* passed through the islands of the Furneaux Group.]

Until now we had never really experienced strong tidal flows. When we were steering 300° (boat's compass) to achieve 355° we got the message. It's pretty disorientating when you are steering with your bow pointing at one place while the place you want to go is way out to one side. And that's what happened. We couldn't decide if the bay we

were heading for was the right one or not, but fortunately the GPS does not lie!

...And so to Lady Barron [Flinders Island] on the flood tide, which added about 1.5 to 2 knots to our speed. The passage through Franklin Sound as portrayed in our cruising guide dictated that we round Great Dog Island from W to E by passing S of it and then following the leads into the anchorage. All very well if you can see the leads, but we nearly became yet another listed wreck on this wreck-littered coast as we passed very close to a rocky reef searching for the leads. It's interesting that when you originally read the information relating to an area it is difficult to come to grips with, but after the event it all makes sense — which isn't very helpful at all really!

The winds continued to blow from E to SE and so off to Badger Island to the W of Flinders

Island, ready to head N. Badger was rather flat and uninteresting and not suitable for going ashore, except for a 'relief break' for Pita. Badger is one of the Chappel Islands, which are full of very venomous snakes. If you are bitten there you need twice as much anti-venene twice as quickly as anywhere else in Tasmania. Most of these islands have very little habitation if any, so help is not readily available...

[Back on Flinders Island, we] moved N to Tanners Bay, for an 'intensifying low' was developing in the Bight. By pm of the next day gale force winds from the NW to SW were forecast and we were advised to move to Royden Island and pick up another fisherman's mooring. This was some of the best advice we had received, as the anchorage was well protected and the mooring would have held 60 tonnes. The wind came in from the W early with a huge frontal storm cloud, rain, high winds and lightning, so long lasting that you could see the land as if it was daylight.

We rocked and rolled and bounced and shook for two days. It felt as if we should have been on passage, but lo and behold after two days we were still in the same location — how unfair was that! We could not get ashore one day. You should have seen the wonder dog crossing her legs, before finally relenting to the forces of nature. Poor old girl, at least it was getting her into shape for crossing Bass Strait...

On Wednesday morning the forecast and conditions had improved to the point that it was almost a perfect forecast for a quick but safe

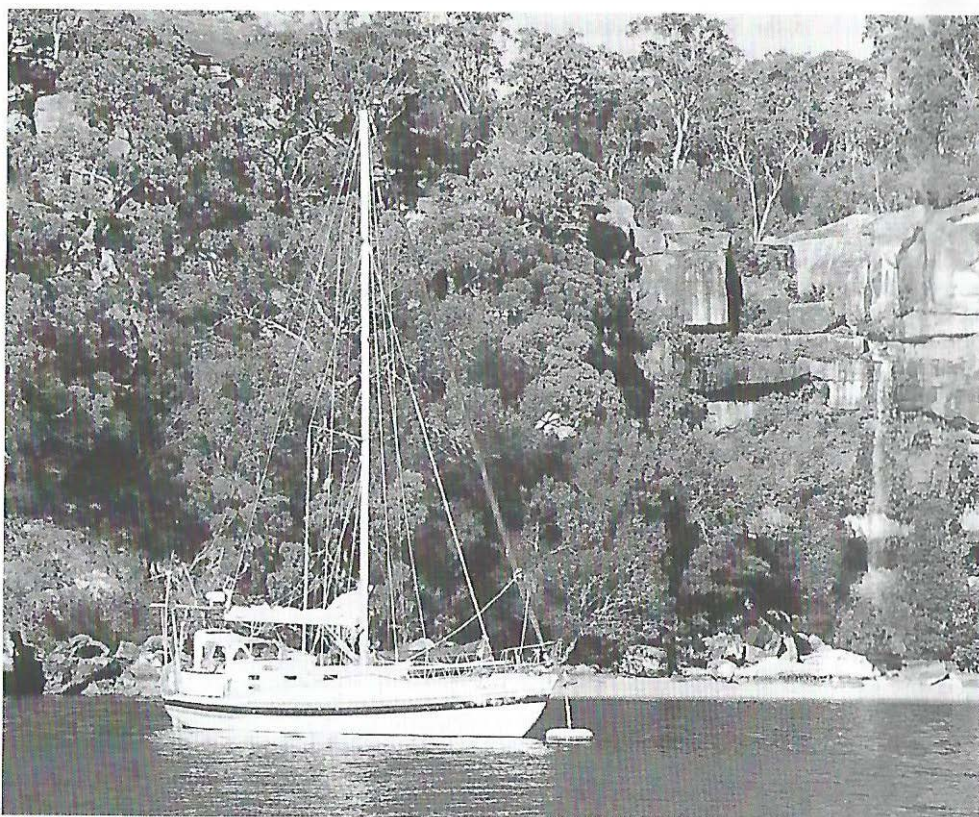
crossing of Bass Strait (S-SE 15-20 knots with seas and swells decreasing. Outlook for the next day was the same with a high developing and moving slowly southeast and becoming almost stationary). While there was still a strong wind warning for the E coast of Tasmania, it was expected that the warning would be finalised that day. There were no warnings for other areas.

Blue skies, blue seas, still a substantial swell, which was decreasing almost as we watched. The lunchtime forecast was still good. The decision was made — go for it! The ship's dog had already been dewatered and the boat was ready to go. We left Royden at about 1315, and after clearing the passage (steep and uncomfortable tide/swell combination) we set course to clear the Sisters Islands off the north coast of Flinders...

As we got out of the lee of the N coast of Flinders Island, the swell started to rise and so did the wind. *Piping Shrike* sails very well downwind with almost no mainsail and just the required amount of headsail. This combination allows the windvane self-steering to handle her 12 tonnes with minimal effort...

Drama on the high seas! Enter *Pong Su* for a bit of light relief. She was the Korean coastal freighter that did a multi-million dollar drug drop off near Lorne, with the loss of one of her crew, and finally was boarded and arrested off Newcastle several days later.

Helen was on watch, while Michael was lashed into a seat in the cockpit so he could sleep



Piping Shrike in Refuge Cove.

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pit forecast at noon had
Winds were now set to
seas and swells.

gressed, with the wind
lower continental shelf
Michael felt concern about
not would be encountered
to the reputation of the
never felt such unease
The shelf was crossed
wasn't too much change in
available on the extensive
light were muesli bars of
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was the result of the sea
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eddy uncomfortable. Dark
ull moon of the previous
were becoming very large
upwellings of water. This
movement on board.

or of the day we had
leg with plenty of warp.
ented with furling the
aysail instead. Wrong
tally added speed, quite
were trying to achieve.
the staysail was raised
olly to port and shot the
tack — slack work: the



stop wasn't located in the holes provided. A
turning block used for the MPS was utilised
while the staysail was brought under control and
lowered. The headsail was resheeted inside the
side-stays and we were able to produce a small
sail with good shape and not too much power.

At the same time, the drama of *Peng Su* continued
in close proximity. The Police requested *Peng Su*
to alter course and head for Eden. Over the next
12 hours she came up with all sorts of lame
excuses as to why they could not. Their engine
had failed, so they could not go to Eden. They
were trying to fix it and the Police would be
informed when the situation had been rectified.
This excuse seemed to be a favourite and was
used often. They had already set a course to the
Solomons (and then to India) and this could not
be altered. The boat could not be boarded by
Customs and the Police as they were taking
breakfast, and then because the rest of the crew
were taking breakfast. Our ship's radio was tuned
into channels 16 and 73 so we could hear the
drama unfolding. *Peng Su* never did alter course
to Eden, but was eventually boarded in Newcastle
and was impounded in Sydney. Thirty crew are
standing trial for drug offences and there has been
international speculation that this is one way in
which the North Korean government acquires
much-needed hard currency.

As the evening progressed, the seas rose, the sky
became darker and rain squalls became more

frequent. Still the trusty wind-vane steered us
along an amazingly straight course. Neither of
us could have steered as well for even a few
minutes, let alone thirty plus hours non-stop.

As we approached a turning point well to the
SSE of Gabo Island, conditions deteriorated
rapidly. The rain squalls could be heard
approaching (and we could also see them when
we got on top of a swell); the swells and sea
were breaking and rolling erratically and our
speed was becoming precarious. The warps
were streamed out and this caused our speed to
decrease by about 1.5 knots. It was just enough
to make us feel a little more comfortable with
the motion and also making it easier for the
wind-vane to control the boat.

The seas continued to rise, the wind continued
to howl, the rain flew horizontally. All was not
so bad on board though. The dodger addition
that Helen had organised in Adelaide was
proving a godsend once again. We were
protected from the elements and to a degree the
horrible sounds of Bass Strait on a bad night.
There was also the ongoing *Peng Su* radio drama
to keep our minds occupied.

It's hard to describe the sound of the wind. As a
squall approached, the wind took on a different
tone, held that tone while the squall lasted and
then, as the squall passed, changed tone again
almost as if a team of banshees was departing.

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The sea building and breaking behind and around us sounded like a train racing along. White water once it had broken whooshed around and beside the boat. All of these sounds were interesting to experience, but not too often, thank you!

The area between Gabo and Eden is a busy shipping lane, so this added an additional twinge of excitement to the waves, wind and rain squalls. Radar was on and we were monitoring vessels closely and making radio contact where possible. Rumor has it that a freighter cannot see anything closer to it than one mile and in these conditions our little blob on the water and radar screen may not have been noticed. Much of the radio contact was made with foreign gentlemen to make it even better. Fortunately we were in contact with an Australian ship when he informed us that he could see us and 'could we confirm that we were the fishing boat approximately five miles away'?

'NO! We are the yacht about 1.5 miles away.'

'OK folks, have you now and will take evasive action'.

'Thanks so much.'

As we turned at Gabo we became aware of another factor to be concerned about — the south-going current that stood the seas up more and decreased our speed over the ground to about 3 knots. Our water speed remained the same as before. We had been aware of a bit of current since passing the New Zealand Star Bank but we were now heading straight into it. The current increased our 'time to go' to Eden quite considerably, which, to be honest, was the last thing we needed.

We hand-steered at this point for a few hours, as the wind vane was not really happy with the conditions and was not correcting our course quickly enough when we took off on broach-like rides down the rollers. It was amazing how slowly the digits in the 'distance-to-go' display of the GPS clocked over at this speed and in the conditions. It was equally amazing how the mind got attuned (or numbed) to the conditions and the hours passed relatively quickly.

About 0400 the main part of the storm appeared to have blown itself to some form of reasonableness. It was still wild, but at least relatively controllable. Helen was able to have a sleep below (cuddled up to the warm and seemingly unconcerned ship's dog). Helen seems to be able to sleep regardless of the conditions, unlike Michael who does not sleep well on a voyage (especially one undertaken in gale force conditions).

After about 38 hours Michael was starting to feel the effects of sleep deprivation and managed to gybe the boat prematurely (while a ship that was aware of our position was approaching) and then had to gybe back again to avoid the ship. The ship was quite a way away and was not a danger, and we had been communicating with each other re our respective positions. As the ship passed the radio person wished us a good journey and thanked us for our co-operation. Nice!

These little manoeuvres caused Helen to part company with Pita and come up to oversee the situation. Just a few hours sleep certainly makes for a sharper mind and our course was corrected to achieve Twofold Bay (Eden). Helen took over and re-commissioned the self-steering (mumbled

comment along the lines of 'no way am I going to hand steer' was heard). This enabled Michael to have some form of sleep in the cockpit.

Wild conditions continued right into Eden. We sailed in with the wind almost behind us, the swell following us and rain overtaking us. However, when we chucked a lefty into East Boyd Bay there was wonderfully flat water, sunshine and little wind. The time: 1145 hrs on Easter Thursday.

Days later we heard a radio interview with the leading Police Officer who had been involved in the *Pong Su* incident. He informed listeners that they had been out in 50-knot winds and 8-metre

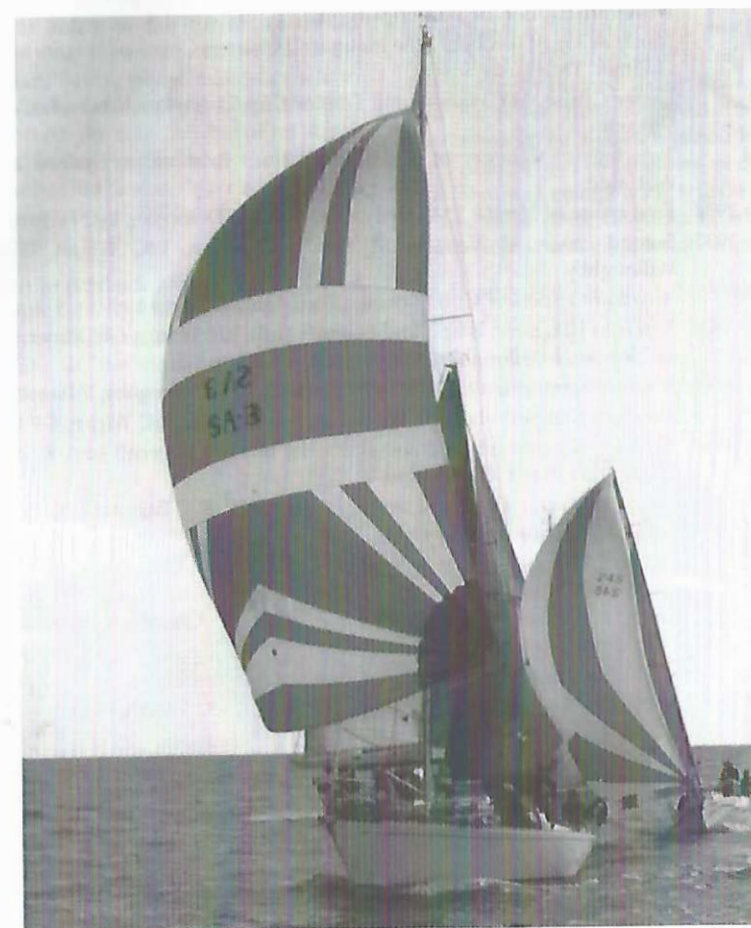
seas. Thank goodness we believed at the time that we were in 40 knots with 5-metre seas, otherwise it would have been scary!

Another vessel *Gumblossom* entered port later that day after having travelled from Launceston half a day behind us. They had similarly judged the weather to be right to travel across Bass Strait and were equally amazed at the conditions.

Well, we're back on the North Island. It's got a lot to live up to after the South Island. Eden northwards will follow at a future date.

At the time of going to press, *Piping Shrike* had enjoyed a trouble-free voyage to Brisbane.

80



Jubilation (Richard and Carol Smith) winner of Division 2, Winter Series. (Roger Oaten)

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