Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

An Englishman Aboard

Discovering France in a Rowing Boat

Written by Charles Timoney

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

An Englishman Aboard

Discovering France in a Rowing Boat

CHARLES TIMONEY



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue,
Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published by Particular Books 2013
Published in Penguin Books 2014
001

Copyright © Charles Timoney, 2013

All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Photographs on pp. 135, 151 and 199 reproduced by kind permission of Peter Eriksson

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject
to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's
prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in
which it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

978–1–846–14480–6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet.
This book is made from Forest Stewardship
Council™ certified paper.

For Sequana

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the people who helped in their various ways with the events that led to the writing of this book, and it seems logical to do it in the order in which they come up in the story:

Nathalie, for pointing me in the direction of La Veules; Fyne Boat Kits, for the kit that started the whole thing off; Polly and Mark, for helping to launch it; the members of Rowing Club de Port Marly, for letting us do so; Andrew, for the barge advice; Lieutenant Olivier Dupas and Major Alain Roux and their colleagues of La Brigade Fluviale; Andy, for the ideas; Vincent, for leading me to Serge, and Serge, for taking me downriver on *Zen*; Ghislain, for introducing me to Bernard, and Bernard, for showing me round the YCIF; Sylvie, for introducing me to Dimitri, and Dimitri, for the trip to Triel; Christophe, for the amphicar; Dominique, for the river trip; Peter and Helen, for the St Crispin's day outing; J.-F., for welcoming me aboard *Hirondelle*; Andy, for the Le Havre info; and especially Inès, for coming along too and making the whole thing possible, Georgina Laycock and Jane Turnbull, without whom there would simply have been no book, and Marina Kemp for creating the final version.

‘There is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.’

The Wind in the Willows

Prologue

Twenty-seven minutes ago, I was standing at the source of the river Veules on the outskirts of Veules-les-Roses in Haute Normandie: a man on a mission.

Veules-les-Roses lies some twenty-five kilometres west of Dieppe. There are pleasant houses faced with local flint, as well as some very pretty thatched cottages. Like any self-respecting French village (even one of just 600 inhabitants), Veules-les-Roses has a church, a *boulangerie*, a *pharmacie*, a post office and a couple of nice restaurants.

The Veules bursts from its source in a rocky bank and quickly joins up with streams from other nearby springs to form a broad expanse of water that is used for growing watercress. Ducks and coots abound. Further downstream, the river narrows and becomes much faster as it weaves between the houses, and the stream is dotted with water wheels. These mills were once used for grinding linseed or fulling cloth, but now, while the wheels still turn with the stream, none seems to do anything useful. Even in its faster-flowing sections between the mills the Veules is home to a surprising number of trout, all effortlessly holding position in the sunniest spots despite the current.

The village is attractive in the sunshine but, at first glance, it doesn't necessarily justify the two-hour drive to get here. The main reason for my mission lies in the fact that the Veules is one of the more notable *fleuves* in France. French makes a clear distinction between rivers that flow into other rivers or into

lakes and which are known as *rivières*, and those that flow into the sea. Such rivers, which include giants such as the Loire or the Rhône, are referred to in French as *fleuves*.

Twenty-seven minutes ago, I was standing by the source of the river. I'm now standing on a cobbled beach, my back to the brisk, cold wind, gazing at the Veules as it sweeps out of a narrow concrete gully and pours down to the sea. I have walked the river's entire length in less than half an hour. Had I not stopped to read the helpful tourist information signs spaced along the way I could probably have done it in under twenty minutes. For the Veules, at just 1,194 metres, is the shortest *fleuve* in France.

Today was really just a trial run to see whether I was able to explore an entire French *fleuve* from one end to the other.

It is now time to try and fulfil my real mission – to explore something a little bit bigger.

I

Absolutely none of this would have happened if I hadn't decided to build a rowing boat.

Of course, I am not suggesting that it is in any way the boat's fault. Nevertheless, if it hadn't been sitting, newly finished, in the garage that New Year's Eve, the months that followed would very probably have been somewhat less eventful. In France, people don't seem to build boats in their garages. What's more, French people seem to find those who do so rather odd, especially if they also happen to be English.

It feels only fair to make clear from the outset that I am English despite the fact that I have been living in France for rather more years than might be considered reasonable, even by a huge fan of the place. The fact that I ended up here is entirely thanks to my wife. Many years ago, enjoying a peaceful but admittedly rather dull life in England, we both lost our jobs in the same month. While I understandably saw this as cause for concern, I was puzzled when Inès took the news more philosophically. Over the following weeks she carefully set about convincing me that we should make the best of a bad situation and use this unexpected freedom to up sticks and go and live in her native France. Just for a year, you understand: only a year. Inès took particular pains to point out that a year spent in a French office would look really good on my CV once we came back to the UK. In this, she may yet be proved right – one day. For the moment, twenty-five years on, I still live in France and I have a home-made rowing boat in the garage.

Everything came to a head on New Year's Eve. We had invited a group of friends round for the *réveillon* – the New Year's Eve meal. Traditionally, this should have involved: oysters, smoked salmon, foie gras, a roast and some very sweet pudding all washed down with copious quantities of wine. It hadn't been possible to prepare all that because I had been busy with the boat, so we had opted for a *fondue savoyarde* – the classic cheese fondue. This has the do-it-yourself aspect that always seems to make collective meals much more fun. About the only thing that we had kept from the list of classic essentials for a *réveillon* meal was the copious quantities of wine.

A cheese fondue is known in France as a *fondue savoyarde*, a name which gives a clue to its origin. It comes from the Savoie region of south-eastern France, down below Switzerland, an area notable for its ski resorts. When skiing holidays became popular in the 1950s, cheese fondues began to be eaten throughout France, but generally only in wintertime. It is the ideal winter dish because eating bread dunked in cheese is both warming and reviving after a long day in the snow, especially if it is accompanied by a local white wine such as Apremont.

You should allow 250 g of cheese per person made up of a mixture of Comté, Beaufort and Emmenthal, to which you add a decent slug of white wine, some kirsch and (unglamorous – but it makes a difference) a bit of corn starch.

There are two important things that you have to remember with cheese fondues. The first is to be generous with the garlic – not only rubbing the inside of the fondue pan with it but also chucking a good quantity of crushed garlic into the mix. This makes it taste better and also easier to digest. The second is to make sure you chop up your baguette at least eight hours in

advance, preferably the night before. This ensures that the bread has got dry and hard enough not to fall to pieces as soon as you dunk it in the melted cheese. Unfortunately, the fact that you should have done something the day before does tend to reduce the possibility of having a spontaneous and successful last-minute fondue evening.

The meal went by extremely cheerily, and, as midnight approached, the subject of the boat came up at last. All the various friends who were present had been following its progress with interest over the preceding months.

'Alors – où est-ce que ça en est?' – how's it coming on? – several people asked at once. When I admitted that I had actually finished it, there was a collective demand to be taken down to the garage to see it, despite the fact that there were only a few minutes left of the year. So, grabbing a couple of bottles of Champagne, I encouraged everyone to bring their glasses and follow me down to the garage. It is a common feature of French houses to have their ground floor on what is effectively the first floor. To come in, you have to go up a flight of steps from the front garden to reach the front door. The garage is then on the ground floor or in the basement, depending on how you look at it, typically together with a laundry room, a spare room and a cellar. A flight of stairs, which is usually hidden behind a door on the ground floor, leads to this lower floor, and it was down these that we all trooped with our glasses and bottles. Someone even thought of bringing the radio from the kitchen so that we could listen for the stroke of midnight.

Retrospectively, it seems a little odd to have gone through the New Year celebrations – 'Bonne année; bonne santé, plein

de bonnes choses . . .' with the associated kissing of cheeks all round – in a very cold garage, but, as midnight chose to strike while we were down there, that is how it worked out.

Once the toasts and kissing were over, our friends started to have a proper look at the boat. It was a wooden, clinker-built rowing boat about seven feet long that I had built from a kit. It had varnished wooden panels that would shine in sunlight and golden wooden oars mounted in gleaming brass rowlocks. Even in the harsh light of the garage I thought it was a thing of beauty. Thankfully, our friends seemed to think it looked quite good too: there was much exclaiming and touching of the varnished wood. There was also quite a lot of speculation as to where I was going to launch it for the first time and what I would do with it afterwards. These were questions that I hadn't actually got round to thinking about at all: over the previous months all I had been preoccupied with had been finding the motivation to go down to the garage every evening to try to finish the thing.

I just smiled enigmatically in answer to their questions and said vaguely 'On verra' – we'll see. This was clearly a most unsatisfactory response in the eyes of our friends.

'You spend months building a boat and you don't even know what you are going to do with it now that it's finished,' they cried accusingly. 'C'est typiquement anglais!' Typically English not to know what you are going to do with a boat? How could they say a thing like that? Unfortunately, I couldn't come up with any kind of reply because they were right: I really hadn't the remotest idea what I was going to do with the boat now that I had finished it. Stalling for time, I said defensively 'Mais si, je sais!' – of course I know – looking desperately around the garage for some kind of inspiration as I did so. From where I was standing all I could see were a couple of grubby mountain

bikes; my private stock of Shreddies; a purple sleeping bag that someone had failed to roll up and put back in its sleeve; my workbench, still littered with the detritus of boat building; and a pile of old books. On top of the pile was *Coming down the Seine*, the adventures of an Irish poet who had rowed down the Seine in the early 1950s.

Still waiting for an answer, someone said, 'Alors?' somewhat sharply. The only inspiration I could see was the book.

'Je vais ramer sur la Seine!' I was hoping that the idea of rowing about on the Seine would be enough to make them all leave me alone so we could go back upstairs into the warm and finish the Champagne.

Unfortunately, they weren't satisfied at all. 'Is that it?! Just row on the Seine a couple of times?'

I tried to justify myself by saying that of course I wasn't going to just row up and down a couple of times. 'Mais, pas du tout!' I was going to do much, much more than that. Waving my arms theatrically, I declared that I was going to maintain the great British traditions of exploring foreign lands and, where possible, claiming them in the name of the Queen, by fearlessly travelling down the nearby reaches of the Seine.

'Just the nearby reaches?' scoffed Christine, one of our more forceful friends and the wife of Siggi. 'I can't see the Queen getting all that excited about a few local reaches. You should row the whole way down the river from one end to the other.'

'I couldn't possibly row a little boat like this the whole length of the Seine. It would take months and months, and I'd probably sink. And anyway,' I carried on, in the tone of one who had come up with the winning argument, 'why on earth should I?'

This question had the opposite effect to the one intended and provoked a barrage of further suggestions.

'To continue the British traditions of nautical exploration that you have just been boasting about,' said one.

'To get fit!' said another.

'To discover the real France . . . whatever that is,' someone else suggested.

To my surprise Inès spoke up in support of this last idea by pointing out that travelling the length of a sizeable river like the Seine would surely cover a fair part of France and would therefore lead me to discover all sorts of interesting places along the way that I would probably never otherwise visit.

This was starting to sound quite tempting. 'That's all very well,' I admitted, 'but I still can't travel the whole length of a major river in just a little rowing boat.'

'We really think you should do it. In fact, we all challenge you to do so. But not just in your boat,' Christine allowed. 'You can use any other craft that are available, but it's up to you to find them. And if you don't manage to travel the whole way by the end of the year, you have to treat us all to more Champagne – a lot more Champagne,' she concluded, draining her glass as she did so.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized it would be a sort of quest. I have always secretly fancied taking part in one – walking the pilgrim's way to Santiago de Compostela or driving a battered old 2CV to Kathmandu: that kind of thing. But, apart from the fact that a decent quest tends to be somewhat time-consuming, one of the reasons why I hadn't ever undertaken one is that you can't really challenge yourself to one; someone else really has to do it for you. And, up until then, that kind of challenge had just never seemed to come up. Now that it had, I was surprised to discover how much I had been hoping for one to come along. And this wasn't just any quest; it was a quest to discover France! I really liked the idea: it had a

nice ring to it. I also reckoned that it would be a fair bit easier than driving to Kathmandu and a lot less tiring than walking all the way to Spain.

But, hang on a minute, quest or not: wasn't this all a bit one-sided? What happened if I managed to reach the sea? Shouldn't *they* have to do something?

'Mais, si j'y arrive, vous allez devoir faire quoi?' I asked, trying desperately to salvage something from the situation.

'If you succeed, we will come to England with you on a reciprocal quest. Ours will involve trying anything English that you want – you know, all those things you are always going on about: Marmite, cricket, English wine, going upstairs on a double-decker bus, drinking horrible warm beer . . . Whatever you like.'

Well, that sounded as though it could be fun.

So we shook on it: I never could resist a challenge.

2

So, whatever possessed me to set about building a rowing boat in the first place?

Boats always seem to have been associated with happy moments in my life: learning to row with one oar on the Thames just below Folly Bridge with my dad when six or seven; learning to sail on the Salcombe estuary on school trips; sailing my venerable and decidedly leaky British Moth dinghy on the Thames by Port Meadow, and much more. But a childhood affection for boats doesn't really explain my sudden desire to transform a draughty suburban garage into a boat yard.

I'm almost positive it wasn't the result of a midlife crisis, not least because I have never heard of one based upon a modest wooden rowing boat. Such crises seem to require the involvement of oriental showgirls or shiny red sports cars at the very least. In fact, what I think led me to spend long hours battling with pieces of wood was the arrival of my new boss. My job at that time was fairly specialized and had required a fair bit of long-term training. My new boss, Thérèse, on the other hand, had no knowledge of it whatsoever. None of my colleagues could work out how she had come to be given the job until someone mentioned in passing that she was a very good friend of a man considerably higher up in the company hierarchy. 'Ah! Cela explique tout!' – that explains everything.

Hard as it may be to believe, in France the chances of getting on in a company thanks to the intervention of one's friends appear somewhat higher than they do in England. A clue to

this lies in the fact that French has not one but two words that relate specifically to this kind of thing. For a start there is *piston* or *pistonner*, a word which can't be directly translated but which has to be explained as 'having friends in high places' or 'string-pulling'. Apparently, the expression comes from the fact that it is the pistons that get the engine moving. A second term, *copinage*, covers pretty much the same concept. This comes from *copain*, a slang word for friend. *Copinage* thus describes the lucky situation where you obtain something that you probably wouldn't otherwise have got, thanks to your friends.

Thérèse was a tall, rather strident woman who always looked like she had dressed in the dark, using clothes picked at random from someone else's wardrobe. But the problem wasn't aesthetic. The friction, and there really was a lot of it, arose due to her complete inability to grasp even the basics of the job. In order to give an idea of what I went through, let's imagine for a moment that my job at that time was that of a bakery manager.

Every Monday-morning meeting, week in week out, would have included a conversation along the following lines.

Thérèse (in a mystified tone): 'Now, about all this white powder that you keep ordering: what is it called again?'

Me: 'Flour.'

Thérèse (more mystified than ever): 'Flour, eh? Why have you never mentioned it before? Now, why do you keep ordering it? It is not as though we sell flour . . . do we? We're a bakery. What on earth do you do with it all?'

After several months of such conversations, it was clear to me and my immediate family that I needed a pastime to occupy me and keep my mind off my job.

Around the time in question there had been a report on the TV about some people who had spent what appeared to be a

very happy time indeed rebuilding a wooden sailing dinghy that looked just like *Swallow* from the *Swallows and Amazons* books. I reckoned that something like that wouldn't tax my DIY skills too much and, more importantly, would keep my mind off work.

I originally set out to look for a second-hand wooden rowing dinghy. But my search ended up on the website of a small firm in Cumbria that made wooden-boat kits. A few clicks later I found myself looking at a series of golden wooden boats floating on calm, sunlit water. And with that, I had found my new destiny: I would build boats, or possibly at least one boat, from a kit. Wasting no time, I grabbed the phone. A very kind chap asked me several carefully worded questions and then steered me tactfully towards a model which was apparently the easiest one for a novice to build. It sounded perfect. There didn't seem to be any point in hanging about after that – once you have found your new destiny you might as well get started on it right away – so, with a brief wave of my credit card, I ordered it.

A couple of weeks later, an enormous cardboard box was delivered to our door – fortunately not by Marcel our postman on his bike but by two hefty guys in a big lorry. For some inexplicable reason, the men decided to carry it straight into our sitting room, rather than down to the garage. The box was at least seven feet long and much too heavy to carry downstairs once the men had gone, so we thought we would open it just where they had left it and then carry all the parts down to the garage later. Much cutting of bindings and slitting of tape revealed the stark reality of a rowing boat in kit form: a vast number of strangely shaped wooden panels of all sizes – far more than I had imagined – several pots of epoxy glue, a set of oars, some nice brass fittings and, right at the bottom of the box, an instruction manual.

It was actually quite fun to have all the pieces laid out on the floor in a giant jigsaw puzzle which made the room smell of sawn wood. In fact, it was so pleasant that I ended up leaving it all there for several days before finally carrying everything down to the garage. Somehow, having bits of boat littered all over the sitting-room floor seemed quite normal because bringing boats into the house was something of a family tradition. When I was a teenager, my battered old sailing dinghy, *Gyro*, twice spent the entire winter in my parents' dining room while I sporadically scraped and repainted her. The fact that I still have one of their dining chairs with smears of scarlet marine paint on its legs suggests that I didn't go to that much trouble to protect their furniture before starting work. Oddly enough, I don't remember that my parents complained that much at the time about being deprived of their dining room for so long. Actually, thinking about this properly now for the first time, I reckon that a possible reason why they didn't grumble more was because it gave them a perfect excuse for not having anyone to supper for the entire time the boat was in there.

When I first looked through the instruction manual, I noticed that it gave guidelines for the time needed for each stage of the assembly process: assembling the panels – four hours, gluing the joints – three hours, and so on. I can now safely say that a team of professional boat builders working on their seventeenth kit could perhaps accomplish the tasks in the recommended time. But, for a complete novice, it became quickly clear that a more accurate idea of the time required could be had by keeping the manufacturer's figures but simply substituting 'weeks' for 'hours'.

As well as taking a lot longer than expected, the building process proved to be far more solitary than I had envisaged.

When I first started the kit I had vaguely assumed that family and friends would come and give me a hand now and again. In fact, no one really came down to the garage at all except on the rare occasions that I desperately shouted for help with holding something or with turning the boat over. I recently asked my family why they hadn't come down to the garage more often and was told that it was because they were all quite convinced I was happy doing it all by myself. So much for inter-family communication. Unfortunately, from this I assumed that they hadn't wanted to come downstairs for fear that they might somehow get in the way or disturb me. Wanting to know if this was so, I foolishly pressed for further details. That was when they spoiled it all by admitting that not only had they all been very happy indeed to be left in peace upstairs while I spent all my spare time downstairs, they had even taken turns to bring me cups of tea and slices of cake to make sure I didn't come back up too soon.

The only time that several people came to chat on the same day was when I took the half-assembled boat outside the garage and set about ironing it.

I had unexpectedly discovered at one crucial point in the assembly process that some of the planks weren't as bendy as I needed them to be. The only way I could think of to make them supple enough was to steam them. So Inès and I carried the boat outside and I spent the next hour or so wandering up and down the planks with our iron pumping out steam for all it was worth. The sight of an Englishman brandishing a steam iron over some pieces of wood caused several neighbours, as well as one unknown passer-by, to come and ask what on earth I was up to. They all ended up staying for a chat. That is very probably the day of the building period that I remember the most fondly.

Of course, there were times when assistance was readily offered and even more readily accepted. At a later stage in the assembly process I found that I needed to get all the planks of the hull lined up exactly in their proper places in order to be able to start glueing the whole thing together. But the planks just wouldn't go where I wanted. In desperation, I called my friend Siggi, who is a German DIY expert. Siggi turned up with several long, blue, belt-like straps. Once wrapped at strategic points around the boat, these allowed us to pull the planks into their proper places. Unfortunately, even when surrounded by straps, the planks still did their best to put up a fight. Trying to get the better of them revealed an interesting facet of international cooperation. While we were happily putting the straps into position and things were going well, Siggi and I chatted calmly, as we generally do, in French. But when things started getting a bit tricky – especially during a mad moment when we were both frantically pushing and pulling the various lengths of wood, heaving on the straps all the while – and fingers started to get painfully trapped under the tightening webbing, we each started shouting in our mother tongues: 'Pull! Quick! Push that bit there! Ow! Mind my fingers!' and 'Mensch! Ist der so ungeschickt, der hat ja wirklich zwei linke Hände!'*

Everyone reverts to their mother tongue when they count, pray or swear. In my experience one's own language is the only one which guarantees the release of built-up tension in a stressful situation, especially one in which your fingers are being squashed. On the other hand, it is not really the best means of communicating between two people of different nationalities. Not speaking any German, I had no idea what

* My God! He's so clumsy – you'd think he'd got two left hands.

Siggi was yelling about – although I could guess. But, whatever it was, we eventually managed to defeat the planks.

The final part of the assembly process was rather easier, involving endless sandpapering of the whole boat, making the rough planks smooth as proverbial silk, followed by the pleasing application of coat after coat of transparent epoxy and varnish.

Once finished, the boat looked pretty good. Of course, if you looked too closely you could spot the occasional clue that it had been built by an amateur. The wooden panels were held together with what the instruction manual referred to as 'fillets': lengths of epoxy resin glue. On the manufacturer's website are pictures of boats made in their own workshop. These boats have fillets that are straight and thin and almost unnoticeable. How on earth their boats stay in one piece with such miserly quantities of glue to hold them together is a mystery. The fillets I made had spread across the inside of the boat like runny toffee spilt on a stove. Beautiful, they were not, but at least they looked reassuringly strong.

The next logical step was to find out whether it actually floated. But where do you launch a home-made rowing boat for the first time? It was far too big for the bath and we don't know anyone with a swimming pool. As I wasn't sure it was actually going to float at all, it seemed a good idea to try and find somewhere relatively safe to launch it. Inès and I therefore spent most of the next two weekends driving about the *département* looking for a nice gentle stream or even a decent-sized duck pond that might fit the bill – but in vain. The lack of a launching site, added to the cold January weather, diminished my enthusiasm to such an extent that the boat languished in the garage for several weeks.

We had almost forgotten about it altogether when some

friends from England came to stay. When Polly and Mark discovered that there was an unlaunched, homemade rowing boat sitting in the garage, they insisted that we do something about it as soon as possible and preferably before they went back to England. Mark came up with the splendid idea of looking for a rowing club on the Seine, because any such club would have a slipway or a jetty that they might let us use if we asked nicely.

The next day was a Sunday, a day any rowing club should be open, but probably not too busy. So, with the boat sitting proudly on the roof rack of Polly and Mark's car, we set off to try the Port Marly rowing club. The club lies on a quiet stretch of the river which is sheltered by a long island. Rather than just turn up with the boat, we thought it might be a good idea to go and see what the people from the club thought about letting some non-members use their jetty for a launching ceremony. We came upon several fit-looking rowers in very professional-looking kit who were getting ready to set off in a couple of sculls. Our initial requests to use their facilities didn't meet with much enthusiasm. They looked decidedly sceptical and made it clear that we would just be getting in their way. 'But I built the boat with my own hands!' I cried, stretching out the hands in question to give weight to my argument. This got a far more positive reaction: two of them asked if they could come and see it. The sight of the boat gleaming in the sunshine on top of the car clearly improved our chances, but, before agreeing to anything, they asked whether we knew anything at all about rowing. It was obvious from the way they asked that they weren't so much concerned with our rowing skills as keen to ensure that they wouldn't have to come and rescue us if anything went wrong. 'Mais, lui, il est de Cambridge, et moi, je suis d'Oxford,' I replied, in the confident tones of one who was

explaining everything. As trump cards go, the fact that Mark lived in Cambridge while I came from Oxford was clearly the perfect one to play with rowers from any nation. They had even heard of Le Boat Race, though we didn't go so far as to try and claim that either of us had actually rowed in it.

After some muttered discussion among the rowers, it began to look as though we were going to be allowed to launch the boat after all. Taking it off the roof rack, the four of us carried the boat proudly towards the long wooden jetty that lay along the bank of the river. By the time we got there, the rowers had clearly warned the other club members about 'les Anglais d'Oxford et de Cambridge'. A worrying number of them had come out of the clubhouse and had actually lined up along the bank to watch. I tried to ignore their distinct moment of collective scepticism when they got their first proper sight of the boat.

A traditional French launching ceremony is similar to a British one in that it involves whacking the boat on the bow with a bottle of Champagne and sending it sliding down a slipway. However, the words used are slightly different. The French person wielding the bottle has to ask God to 'Daignez par votre sainte main, Seigneur, bénir ce navire et tous ceux qu'il portera' – deign by your hand, Lord, to bless this ship and all who sail in it. Given that the French words for boat and ship – *bateau* and *navire* – are both masculine, there is no equivalent of the English habit of calling ships 'she'.

Traditionally, in the UK, it is the Queen who is called upon to name important ships; in France it often falls to the President's wife. *Le France* – France's greatest transatlantic liner – was launched in 1960 by Mme Yvonne de Gaulle. Her husband,

President Charles de Gaulle, accepted an invitation to speak after his wife, apparently because it would give him a unique opportunity to cry: 'Vive *le* France; vive *la* France!'

Unfortunately, in the excitement of setting off that morning we had forgotten all about the Champagne. As it turned out, this wasn't really a problem, because the club didn't actually have a slipway at all. So, rather than have any kind of formal launching ceremony, we ended up just carrying the boat onto the jetty and plonking it in the water. Once in the water, the boat just sat there, not doing much apart from bobbing about a bit, with everyone looking on in complete silence. The moment clearly called for some kind of guidance, so I cried 'Il flotte!' For float it clearly did. At this, Inès, Polly and Mark cheered, whereupon all the rowing club people started clapping enthusiastically too. 'Fluctuat nec mergitur!' cried one of the rowers. This is the motto of the city of Paris, which features on the city's shield under a picture of a boat. It roughly means 'It pitches up and down, but does not sink.' It was so appropriate that I really wished *I* had thought of saying it.

The boat had been in the water for almost a minute by then and, to my understandable relief, there were no signs of any leaks: my generous use of glue was clearly paying dividends. It was perhaps time to put my boat-building ability to the ultimate test by getting aboard for the first time. I tentatively slipped onto the thwart, slightly anxious that any mistakes I might have made were about to be brought spectacularly to light in front of a group of experts. Thankfully, while the boat settled a little in the water, there were no alarming creaks or groans from any of the planks and still no

signs of any leaks. In fact, despite being relatively light, once it was in its element for the first time the boat felt reassuringly strong and sound. 'Alors, vous allez l'essayer?' another of the rowers inquired. Of course I was going to try it. I slipped the oars into their beautiful brass rowlocks, gave a proud salute and pulled away from the jetty. A photo was taken just as I rowed away. The boat looks wonderful, of course, with its gleaming wood and golden oars, but I especially like it because I have the happiest grin of any photo I have seen in recent years. I had built a boat, and it actually floated – who wouldn't have grinned?

