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Face to Face: Ocean Portraits

Written by Huw Lewis-Jones

Published by Conway

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FACE TO FACE

OCEAN PORTRAITS

HUW LEWIS-JONES



CONWAY

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FRONT COVER: Stewart ‘Tea-boy’ Kirk, the last shore attendant for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Hoylake lifeboat station, 1992.

FRONT MONTAGE, pp. 6-7.
Top left to bottom right: Barracudas surround diver Dinah Halstead, Papua New Guinea, 1987; Lifeboat crewman Dougie Armitage, Hoylake station, 1992; J-class yacht *Velsheda* races at the Antigua Classic Regatta, 2001; Italian ocean rower Alex Bellini relaxes on Lake Como near Mandello del Lario, 2009; Frank Beken demonstrates his ‘marine camera’, 1935; Underwater film producer Michele Hall comes face to face with an octopus off Whyalla, South Australia, 2008; A young crew member of the German barque *Herzogin Cecile* encourages a Southern Royal Albatross to pose for a photograph in 1928; ‘the poor thing was seasick so was let go again’; The St Davids Tyne-class lifeboat *Garside* powers through the waves, 2005; Jean-Michel Cousteau enjoys a dive with a Hawksbill turtle, Papua New Guinea, 2008; Abbey emerges from the sea, photographed using the wet-plate collodion process, 2008; Lifeboat crewman and museum keeper Frank ‘Jumbo’ Muirhead on the beach at Cromer, 2009; The elegant gaff-rigged cutter *Kathleen*, 1901; Syd Bensley, the mate of the Grimsby trawler *Northern Princess*, examines his net, 1952; Veteran marine explorer Don Walsh wears his old deep-sea diving helmet, 2009; The crew of the pioneering craft *Resurgam*, the world’s first propelled submarine, appear shortly before its launch in 1879; David Doubilet on assignment with Caribbean reef sharks, 2008.

REAR MONTAGE, pp. 286-87.
Top left to bottom right: A crewman from the Appledore lifeboat comes to the rescue, 2005; Glaciologist Roy ‘Fritz’ Koerner on the Arctic Ocean, 1969; Ellen MacArthur onboard the Open 60 *Kingfisher*, during a photo shoot in the Solent, 2000; A lone swimmer heads for the bathing huts, 1907; George Watson, the watchman of HMS *Warspite* poses with the ship’s cat ‘Stripey’ shortly before the famous battleship was scrapped, 1947; James Tomlinson explores the depths at Sunsail Antigua, 2008; A Falmouth fisherman relaxes with a pint, 1948; Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl, who became world famous in 1947 when he skippered the small balsawood raft *Kon-Tiki* across the Pacific Ocean from Peru to Tahiti, is photographed in Tenerife, 1998; Veteran surfer Roger Mansfield relaxes in the sunshine on the cliff-tops above Newquay Bay, 2009; Merchant Navy engineer officer Howard Flood at home at Hawarden, Flintshire, 2009; La Jolla Shores legend Dave McLeod at the ‘Gathering of the Tribes’ surf contest, Church Beach, San Onofre, 2010; Ernest Shackleton at the wheel of *Nimrod* on her Antarctic voyage, 1909; A new ship’s propeller, inspected in Greenwich, 1964; *Ericsson 3* makes her way in to Cape Town, after the opening stage of the Volvo Ocean Race, 2008; David Doubilet photographing Caribbean reef sharks at a wreck in waters off the Bahamas, 2008; Despite losing her left arm in a shark attack in 2003, Hawaiian surfer Bethany Hamilton bravely returned to the oceans and the sport she has loved since childhood.

REAR PAGE: ‘Captain’ Elvy shows off his new tattoos in 1943. ‘Sailor’ George Fosdick was the artist responsible for this amazing maritime work featuring mermaids, flying fish, and a clipper ship under full sail. We know next to nothing about the mariner Elvy, though he may have later worked as a circus attraction on the American west coast. With loss overboard and shipwreck a common peril of the nineteenth-century sea-faring life, sailors’ appearances were logged on ‘protection certificates’, which even detailed their tattoos, to help with identification of their bodies. As much as decoration, the tattoo became an integral part of a mariner’s identity – both in life and in death.

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PREVIOUS PAGE: An unidentified sailor from HMS *Prince* stops for a portrait before rejoining his ship, 1917.

RIGHT: A humpback whale cruises past in the ocean off Tonga. This enigmatic portrait, by Sue Flood, won the best single image of ‘natural wonders’ in the *Travel Photographer of the Year* competition, 2009.







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LEFT: *Ericsson 4* leaves Cape Town bound for India, at the start of Leg 2 of the Volvo Ocean Race on 15 November 2008. Spanning some 37,000 nautical miles, visiting eleven ports over nine months, the Volvo Ocean Race is the world's premier ocean yacht race for professional crews. Skippered by the masterly Torben Grael, *Ericsson 4* emerged as the overall winner.

FOLLOWING PAGE: The *Granite State*, an American ship built in 1877, was sailing to Swansea with a cargo of wheat when she struck on the Runnelstone, three miles south-east of Land's End. She was hauled off and towed, severely waterlogged, to the shelter of Porthcurno Bay, where this rare photograph was taken in November 1895. All seemed well, but when her cargo of wheat started to swell and burst her hatches, the crew had to abandon ship and take to the boats. Sightseers had only a few days to view the grounded ship before she was smashed to pieces by a savage winter storm.

FOLLOWING PAGE: Renowned underwater cinematographer Didier Noirot leaves the security of his dive cage to come face to face with a huge great white shark in the waters off Guadalupe Island, Mexico, 2006. He has spent the last four years with Jacques Perrin filming Oceans, the ground-breaking wildlife documentary released in 2010. He is now working on the *Frozen Planet* series produced by the BBC and Discovery.



SOUTHAMPTON, 1949

DONALD SORRELL 1894-1958

Captain Donald Sorrell braves the media glare at a press call one cold January morning in Southampton, just before his ship *Caronia* made her maiden voyage to New York. Known as the 'Green Goddess' for her distinctive livery, she was the first ship ever purpose-built for the dual role of passenger crossings and luxury cruising. With her fabulous art-deco interiors and high crew to passenger ratio, she quickly became the post-war jewel of the British Merchant Navy, with a Cunard career spanning nearly twenty years. Sorrell served as RMS *Caronia*'s captain through to 1951, making over thirty Atlantic crossings in addition to a great number of cruises in the West Indies.

Born in London, Sorrell went to sea at the age of fifteen aboard the square-rigger *William Mitchell*, as the first in his family to try a life at sea. During the four years of his apprenticeship he ferried coal to Chile, joined a voyage to Australia, and made a final run to the South Pacific in the barque *Falkirk*. In 1914, as third officer of the British India Steam Navigation Company's *Urlana*, he helped to transport a Sikh regiment from Bombay to Marseilles in the first convoy of the First World War. Two years later, in Hong Kong, Captain Sorrell acquired his master's ticket.

He joined the Cunard Steamship Company in 1918 and during the next two decades served on a score of grand ocean liners, including *Mauretania*, the world's fastest, and the beautiful old four-stacked *Aquitania*. He was chief officer of RMS *Georgic* when she went to Norway in June 1940 to evacuate British, French and Polish troops. The ship took out some 3,000 men while Nazi planes hunted them. Ten days later he was ordered to take part in a similar evacuation at Saint-Nazaire. He and his crew brought 5,000 British soldiers out of France while under constant air attack.

In 1953, Sorrell attracted the attention of the newspapers for docking the 81,000-ton *Queen Mary* – the size of the Empire State Building – without the usual fleet of tugboats, owing to a strike in New York. His use of an ebb tide, winches, a rowboat and a small motor launch, was heralded as 'a feat of seamanship among seamen'. He retired in 1956 and died peacefully at home shortly afterwards. An obituary in *The New York Times* described this veteran of ocean cruising: 'A short, slender, soft-spoken man, of ruddy complexion, Captain Sorrell was one of the ablest Cunard masters. In his forty-seven year career at sea he had climbed the ratlines and swung the capstan bars of square-riggers and had navigated the largest ocean liners'.

MANDELLO DEL LARIO, 2009

ALEX BELLINI 1978-

Italian adventurer Alexandro Bellini first attempted to row the Atlantic in 2004, before technical problems and bad weather forced his boat onto the rocks of Formentera Island, off the coast of Spain. In 2005, after 226 days and almost 10,000 miles at sea, he finally reached Brazil. Despite the hardship of this solo voyage, the ocean had Bellini in its thrall. His thoughts quickly turned to the biggest challenge of them all – the Pacific.

In 2008, after ten months of rowing and drifting some 9,500 nautical miles alone across the ocean, Bellini was forced to end his voyage just sixty-five miles short of Australia. Exhausted, severely malnourished and with poor weather approaching, he called for help by satellite phone. He was tantalizingly close, and it must have been a heart-breaking decision to take. This charismatic portrait was captured by Andrea Raso after Bellini had returned home to safety. Asked why her husband did it, Francesca Bellini told newspapers, ‘He is an extreme sportsman, he’s not after records’. It was an inward journey to discover something of himself, Bellini tells me. At the mercy of the open ocean he had found his answer. He has now promised his wife he would not dare try it again.

The Atlantic was first crossed in an open boat by a pair of Norwegian-American immigrants in 1896. Frank Samuelsen, a merchant sailor and George Harbo, a surfboat fisherman, had risked their lives for the promise of prize money. They are largely forgotten today. The great ocean would not be dared again until 1966, when the soldiers John Ridgway and Chay Blyth rowed for 92 days in a 20-foot wooden dory. Since then, the once perilous voyage has become an attractive adventure sport – hundreds have followed them and many more have tried, but failed, to make it across. Ridgway’s motivation was simple: ‘I was trying to make my name,’ he said afterwards. ‘That’s why I was doing it. That’s what ambitious people do’. Blyth was equally direct. Like adventurers throughout history, he wanted to find escape. ‘It didn’t really matter what it was’, he explained sometime later, ‘I was keen to have a go’. Blyth’s only experience of the sea before taking on the open ocean was a short trip on a cross-Channel ferry. For Bellini, struggling against the ocean has enabled him to explore a new mental territory. But for now, he’s enjoying a new passion – hot air ballooning.

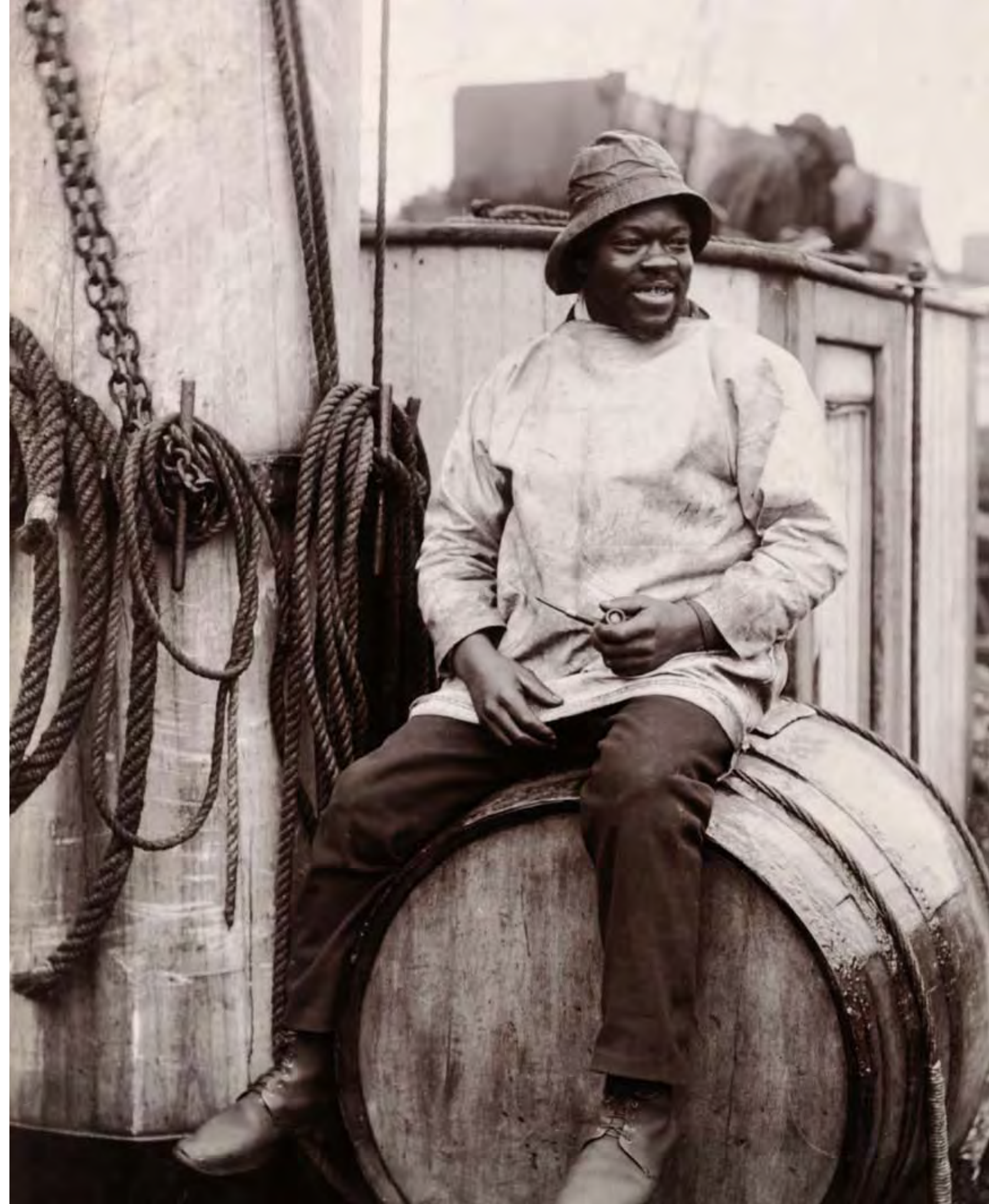


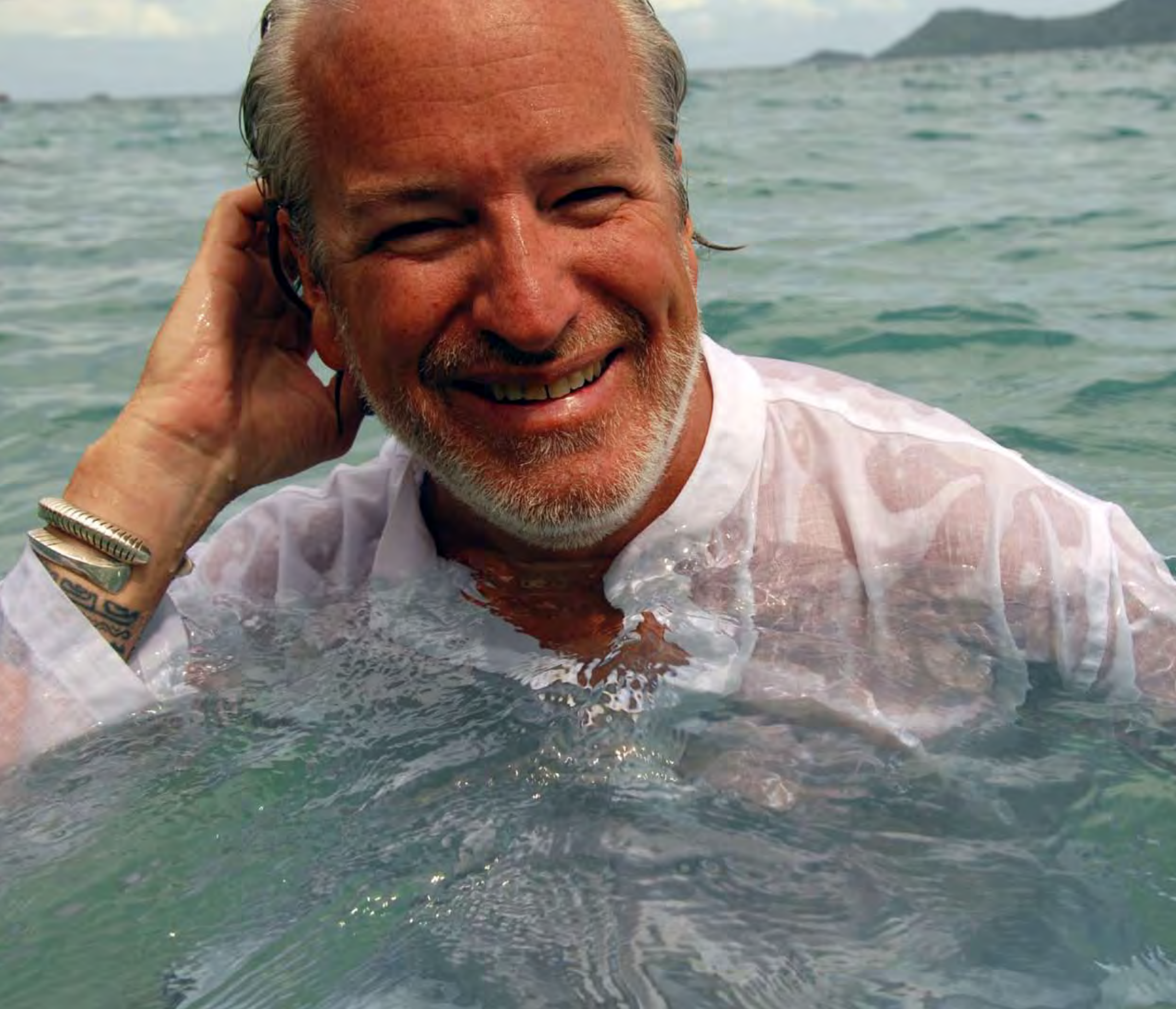
LOWESTOFT, 1895

FISHERMAN n.d.

This remarkable portrait was taken by George Davison, renowned pictorial photographer, political activist and patron of the arts. Son of a Sunderland shipwright, young Davison was born in the Suffolk village where he returned to create some of his finest work. On the edge of the North Sea, Lowestoft is the most easterly town in the United Kingdom and for centuries was just a small fishing and farming village perched on the cliff-top. But, after its harbour was developed in the 1830s, the town's fortunes improved rapidly. Regular steamers would travel to and from London, a railway connection was added in 1847, and business and tourists soon followed. Trade links were established with Norway and Denmark and seaside hotels, taverns, and shipyards supported a thriving economy. At its peak, in the early twentieth century, there were as many as a thousand sailing boats in the port alone. Its most lucrative export was herring, known locally as the 'silver darling', and workers came from all over the country to help with the catch.

Davison was an elected council member of the Royal Photographic Society, and became deeply involved in artistic debates about the future of the art. In time he resigned from the society and he, with ten others, formed a bohemian brotherhood that later became the renowned photographers' collective, the 'Linked Ring'. The turning point in his career, however, came in 1889 when George Eastman – impressed with his photographic talent and organizing skills – appointed him director of the British branch of his Photographic Materials Company. In 1897, he became assistant manager of the growing business, renamed 'Kodak Limited'. Though his salary was modest, after some savvy decisions he became one of the company's leading shareholders, second only to Eastman himself. By the time Eastman asked him to resign in 1912, Davison was an anarchic millionaire who had all but given up photography.





COMOROS ISLANDS, 2009

JON BOWERMASTER 1954-

Jon Bowermaster takes a break in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. A six-time grantee of the National Geographic Expeditions Council and an award-winning writer and film-maker, he recently concluded his OCEANS 8 project. It was an ambitious ten-year global expedition that took him around the world by sea kayak, down the coast of Vietnam, into the heart of the Aleutian Islands, within the Tuamotu Atolls of French Polynesia and amongst towering icebergs off the Antarctic Peninsula. From magazine articles through to educational curricula, the lively dispatches from his travels have now travelled the globe.

Seeing the world from the seat of a kayak has given Bowermaster a one-of-a-kind perspective to consider both the health of the planet's waters and the lives of the nearly three billion people around the globe who depend on them. His website and daily blog, *Notes from Sea Level*, draw attention to the latest concerns. His companion book to the DisneyNature film *Oceans* was launched at its premiere on Earth Day in 2010. 'People go to the edge of the sea for a variety of reasons', he tells me. 'The rich go for respite, the poor to find work, holiday-seekers for relaxation. Just sitting at the ocean's edge looking toward the horizon line where blue-meets-blue is revitalizing and chastening for me. The ocean is life itself but it needs our help'.

HALIFAX, 1944

HENRY LARSEN 1899-1964

It's a sunny morning in Nova Scotia in July 1944. Canadian-Norwegian explorer Henry Larsen poses for his portrait on the deck of his wooden motor schooner, *St Roch*. In 1950, she chugged back into Halifax harbour having completed the first circumnavigation of North America via the Panama Canal. Though the pioneering voyage took just 137 sailing days, Larsen had spent the best part of five years ferrying supplies to remote outposts throughout the labyrinthine waterways of northern Canada. As an exercise in asserting sovereignty over a barren, largely unexplored region of some half a million square miles, it was a huge public success, but equally what seemed to many like a futile exercise. But, in the geopolitical scramble in the North, then as now, gestures are all important.

Henry Asbjörn Larsen was born in Norway and began his sea career as an apprentice in the fisheries. He graduated from the Norwegian State Navigation School, did his duty with a six-month stretch in the Norwegian Navy and then signed on as mate on the steamer *Roosevelt*. By 1924 he was mate of the schooner *Maid of Orleans* and made a number of trading voyages to the Arctic. He moved to Canada in 1927, becoming a British citizen. The following year he joined the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, though he later confessed to never having ridden a horse before.

Larsen had timed his entry perfectly. They were building their own patrol

ship, *St Roch*, and he was the ideal man to lead her. One of the last wooden ships to operate in the Arctic, her round bottom, designed to escape ice pressure, sent her bucking and heaving in a gale 'like a bronco'. Larsen called her the 'Ugly Duckling' and declared her the most uncomfortable ship he had ever been in. *St Roch* had other honours. Between June 1940 and October 1942 she sailed from Vancouver to Halifax, becoming the first vessel to traverse the Passage from west to east. Larsen's dedication to Arctic work was unswerving. Over an eight-year period he took only one short trip south, he recalled, 'to get married and learn to walk again with ordinary shoes'.

Larsen was promoted to staff sergeant after the first crossing, commissioned with the rank of inspector after the second, and later made a superintendent. He remained with the 'Mounties' until his retirement in 1961, when he moved with his family to Vancouver. He was the author of five books and his autobiography, *The Big Ship*, was published in 1967, a few years after his death. One of his final remarks, written in a letter to a friend, was that he would 'soon be setting out on that last, great sled patrol'. *St Roch* survives in the Vancouver Maritime Museum, and in 1987 the Canadian Coast Guard commissioned an icebreaker in his honour. After a refit in 2000, the CCGS *Henry Larsen* is now capable of operating year-round in the High Arctic.



GALWAY BAY, 2009

JARLATH CUNNANE 1944-

Jarlath Cunnane leans past us to check the trim of the foresails. It's dawn off the west coast of Ireland. Our craft is a beautiful old Galway hooker and from below lift the smells of bacon and coffee. 'You're surely done by now lads', he says, 'cos I'm certain its time for breakfast'.

A grand, polar bear of a man, Cunnane looks as if he were born for a life at sea. He's a gentle soul and, I imagine, a wonderful guy to travel with. His eyes twinkle with songs and stories yet to be enjoyed. He built his first boat – a 14-foot dinghy – when he was still a teenager. Despite a busy professional life as the manager of major civil engineering projects across Ireland, he somehow found time to build himself a steel Van de Stadt 34, which he sailed to the Azores in 1990. Buoyed by this adventure, he chose to 'retire early and get a life'. 'Besides my ever-tolerant wife and our beautiful children', he tells me, 'this was the best decision I ever made!'

In 1997, he joined an Irish expedition recreating Shackleton's epic boat voyage across the Southern Ocean in the 22-foot lifeboat *James Caird*, building their replica boat himself. Most famously, Cunnane built and skippered *Northabout*, a 50-foot ice-strengthened aluminium yacht for his attempt to navigate the Northwest Passage. Despite encountering heavy ice, and unfathomable military bureaucracy, they completed the voyage in a record thirteen weeks. The crew returned to Ireland, leaving the boat in Alaska. But the challenge of the polar sea would tempt Cunnane once more. He decided to sail her home via the Northeast Passage, the 'Northern Sea Route' along the barren Russian coast. He finally completed this passage in 2005, having over-wintered in Siberia. In doing so *Northabout* became the first yacht to complete an east-to-west circumnavigation the Arctic Ocean. For his 'seamanship and adventure' Cunnane was rightly awarded the prestigious Blue Water Medal.



LONDON, 1848

SIR FRANCIS BEAUFORT 1774-1857

Born in County Meath, Francis Beaufort was the son of a wealthy local heiress and a Protestant clergyman with a passion for cartography. Having been rejected by a school in England on the grounds his Irish accent would corrupt the speech of the other boys, Beaufort determined to escape to sea. In 1789 he joined the Honourable East India Company ship *Vansittart* bound for Indonesia. While surveying the Gaspar Strait, near the South China Sea, the ship was wrecked, but Beaufort and most of the crew survived. He returned to England in time to be mobilised for war against France, rising from midshipman to commander. He served in the frigate *Aquilon* during the Battle of the Glorious First of June in 1794. He was later wounded in the Mediterranean while capturing the Spanish ship *San Josef*, receiving a blow to the head and 'several slugs in his body and arms'.

Nevertheless, he returned to active service and became captain in 1810. For leisure, he spent his days taking soundings, bearings and measuring shorelines. At night he perfected methods of astronomical observation to better determine longitude and latitude. In 1812 he explored the classical ruins of southern Anatolia, before being shot in the hip by a 'mob of fanatical Turks'. It was during these years, that Beaufort developed the first versions of his Wind Force Scale, which he was to use in his journals throughout his life, and for which he is best remembered today.

He returned to England and drew up the charts of his travels. In 1829, on the brink of retirement at the age of fifty-five, Beaufort became the Hydrographer of the Admiralty and held the post for the next twenty-five years. He transformed what was essentially a storage dépôt into the finest surveying institution in

the world. Many of their excellent charts are still used, over 150 years after they were created. He took over the administration of the great astronomical observatories at Greenwich and the Cape of Good Hope, he helped found the Royal Geographical Society, he established weather recording as a science and encouraged the development of the world's first tide tables. Perhaps even more spectacularly, Beaufort helped direct many of the great maritime endeavours of the age, including James Clark Ross's expedition to Antarctica and Robert Fitzroy's circumnavigation in the *Beagle*, with the young Charles Darwin in tow. Like many other patrons of exploration, Beaufort is remembered on charts all over the world: the Beaufort Sea in the Arctic, inlets in Western Australia and North Carolina, and a remote island in the Antarctic – a windswept lump of volcanic basalt, home to a colony of penguins.

Beaufort was made a rear admiral at the age of seventy-two but stayed on at the Hydrographic Office, working until 1855. Considering that he still carried a lead ball in his chest, had been knocked down by a runaway post office van, was deaf, and survived a heart attack at his desk, he was still in surprisingly good spirits. He was also keeping up his weather journal. Somewhat belatedly, he was knighted for his efforts in 1848. Shortly afterwards, in civilian dress, he posed for a photograph by John Mayall at his newly-opened London studio, the 'American Daguerreotype Institution'. This rare image is a coup in itself, for few others of Beaufort survive, but equally so as a perfect example of this pioneering photographic process. Beaufort died in 1857, just as this new technology was transforming the way people saw themselves. It would not be long before photography had travelled the globe.

