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A Voyage for Madmen

Written by Peter Nichols

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A VOYAGE FOR MADMEN

PETER NICHOLS

PROFILE BOOKS

For Marion and Jeric Strathallan

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List of Characters

The nine competitors in the Golden Globe race, and their boats, in order of departure:

John Ridgway, 29, captain in the British Army. Rowed across the Atlantic with Chay Blyth in a 20-foot open boat in 1966. Departed Inishmore, Ireland, 1 June, 1968. Sloop *English Rose IV,* 30-foot-long twin-keeled fibreglass.

Chay Blyth, 27, former British Army sergeant. Ridgway's transatlantic rowing partner. Departed Hamble 8 June. Sloop *Dytiscus III,* fibreglass, twin-keeled 30-footer, very similar to *English Rose IV.*

Robin Knox-Johnston, 28, British Merchant Marine captain. Departed Falmouth 14 June in the 32-foot-long ketch *Suhaili,* built of teak in India.

Bernard Moitessier, 45, French sailor-author. Sailed with his wife nonstop from Tahiti to Spain, via Cape Horn, in 1965–6 aboard his 39-foot-long steel ketch *Joshua.* Departed Plymouth, Devon, 22 August aboard *Joshua.*

Loïck Fougeron, 42, French, manager of a motorcycle

company in Casablanca, Morocco. Friend of Moitessier's. Departed Plymouth 22 August in the 30-foot-long, gaff-rigged steel cutter, *Captain Browne*.

Bill King, 57, farmer, former British Navy submarine commander. His 42-foot-long, junk-rigged, cold-moulded wood schooner, *Galway Blazer II,* was designed and built expressly for a nonstop circumnavigation, but not for a race. Departed Plymouth 24 August.

Nigel Tetley, 45, Royal Navy lieutenant commander. Sailed in his live-aboard home, a 40-foot-long, 22-foot-wide, plywood trimaran ketch, *Victress*. Departed Plymouth 16 September.

Alex Carozzo, 36, Italian single-hander who had previously sailed alone across the Pacific, in the 66-foot cold-moulded wooden ketch *Gancia Americano* built for the Golden Globe race. He 'sailed' – that is, he removed to a mooring at Cowes, Isle of Wight, to continue preparations – on the final deadline date set by the race sponsor, the London *Sunday Times*: 31 October. He put to sea a week later.

Donald Crowhurst, 36, English electronics engineer. His 40-foot-long, ketch-rigged, plywood trimaran, *Teignmouth Electron,* was a modified sister ship to Tetley's *Victress*. He too sailed on 31 October, within hours of the *Sunday Times* deadline.

Introduction

Towards the end of the 1960s, as Mankind closed in on its goal of voyaging to the moon, nine men set out in small sailboats to race each other around the watery earth, alone and without stopping. It had never been done before. Nobody knew if it could be.

It was dubbed by its eventual sponsor, the *Sunday Times,* the Golden Globe race. It was the historical progenitor of modern single-handed yacht racing, to which it bears almost no resemblance. Today, high-tech, multimillion-dollar, corporate-sponsored sailing machines race around the world in 100 days or less. Their captains talk by phone and send e-mail to their families and headquarters ashore. They receive weather maps and forecasts by fax. They navigate using the global positioning system (GPS), their locations determined by satellites and accurate to within yards. These positions are simultaneously transmitted to race organisers ashore. Today's racers cannot get lost or file false reports of progress. If they get into trouble, rescue aircraft can often reach their exact locations in a matter of

hours. They may race through the most dangerous waters in the world, but their safety net is wide and efficient.*

The Golden Globe racers sailed in the age before satellites provided pinpoint navigation and verification of positions. Like Captain Cook in the eighteenth century, they navigated by sextant, sun, and stars. Their world at sea was far closer to that earlier age than to ours today. When they sailed, heading for the world's stormiest seas in a motley array of new and old boats, they vanished over the horizon into a true unknown. The only information of their whereabouts and what was happening to them came from their own radio transmissions. In time, the radios broke down; several sailors carried no radios at all. One man, sending reports of tremendous progress that made him appear a likely winner, never, in fact, left the Atlantic Ocean, but tried to fake his passage around the world.

Compared with the yachts of today their boats were primitive and unsophisticated – and small: the living space in which the sailors planned to spend the better part of a year was about the size of a Volkswagen bus.

These men sailed for reasons more complex than even they knew. Each decided to make his voyage independent of the others; the race between them was born only of the coincidence of their timing. They were not sportsmen or racing yachtsmen: one didn't even know how to sail when he set off. Their preparations and their boats were as varied as their personalities, and the contrasts were startling. Once at sea, they were exposed to conditions frightening beyond imagination and a loneliness almost unknown in human experience.

Sealed inside their tiny craft, beyond the world's gaze, stripped of any possibility of pretence, the sailors met their truest selves. Who they were – not the sea or the weather – determined the nature of their voyages. They failed and succeeded on the grandest scale. Only one of the nine crossed the

*Still, they can disappear and perish at sea, as did Canadian Gerry Roufs in the 1996 Vendée Globe race.

finish line after ten months at sea and passed through fortune's elusive membrane into the sunny world of fame, wealth, and glory. For the others the rewards were a rich mixture of failure, ignominy, sublimity, madness, and death.

The race was the logical inevitability of the first tentative passage made by a man daring to float across a lagoon on a log: in the end, alone and without stopping, he floated so far that he arrived back at the place from where he started, there being no farther earthbound voyage.

Like the first ascent of Everest, it was a feat without any larger purpose than its own end. But like a trip to the moon, it was a voyage that provided Man with another benchmark of the far reach of his yearning endeavour.

The Golden Globe race happened in a different world, as distant, in terms of our experience with the sea, as Joseph Conrad's. The story of that race now has the feel of an older romance of the sea, a tale of unlikely, heroic, desperate, and tragic characters.

At the time of the Golden Globe race, I was a schoolboy in England. I knew nothing of sailboats and sailing. But a few years later I took a brief (disastrous, frightening, and wildly exciting) trip aboard an old wooden schooner and my life derailed and spun away seaward. I spent a decade and a half seriously afloat. I worked my way up from paint-scraping grunt to licensed professional yacht captain, delivering sailboats for owners in the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and across the Atlantic. Eventually my wife and I bought our own small wooden sailboat and moved aboard it full-time.

During those years I collected and read every book I could find about the sea and small-boat voyaging. The literature of the sea, I found, interested me as much as the sea itself. In time I came across a few books about the Golden Globe race and became fascinated – obsessed – by this story. I scoured newspaper libraries for articles about the race. I wondered what it was

like to be alone at sea for long stretches of time, and I wondered about those men. I decided I wanted to try single-handed sailing, to get a little taste of what they had experienced, alone and far out at sea.

I got it – more than I bargained for. After the breakup of my marriage, I started across the Atlantic, bound from England to the United States, alone in my 27-foot-long, 44-year-old wooden sailboat, *Toad*. It was an eventful, bittersweet voyage that ended with *Toad* sinking a week short of reaching the American shore.

Reading of the Golden Globe race as I learned to sail, the story became a core ingredient of my fascination with small boats and the sea. Crossing most of an ocean alone and having my boat founder beneath me only intensified my obsession. This book is the result of a deep investigation into that race, and my efforts to put myself aboard each of those boats and into the minds of those nine very different men.

A VOYAGE FOR MADMEN

I

In 1966–7, a 65-year-old Englishman, Francis Chichester, sailed alone around the world. He stopped only once, in Australia.

A tall, thin, balding man with thick-lensed glasses, Chichester looked more like a prep school headmaster than an adventurer. He owned a small book and map shop in London. He was a vegetarian. But the urge to subject himself to extreme tests characterised his life. In his youth he made a pioneering flight in a small aircraft from England to Australia. In 1960, at the age of 59, he and four friends made a wager to race each other single-handedly in their four very different boats across the Atlantic. The course began at Plymouth's Eddystone Lighthouse and finished at the Ambrose light vessel off New York Harbour; the route between these two points was up to the racers. There were no other rules. The winner would receive half a crown.

Francis Chichester won the bet and the race. Sailing his 39-foot sloop *Gypsy Moth III,* the largest boat of the five, he made Ambrose in forty days. But winning was not enough; he thought he could do it faster. Two years later, racing nobody but himself, he crossed the Atlantic again, cutting more than six

days off his earlier voyage. Still he was not happy with his time; he believed a crossing of less than thirty days was possible.

The *Observer* had covered the 1960 race and found that it owned a story with major and growing public interest. Four years later, in 1964, the *Observer* sponsored a second single-handed transatlantic race (now famously known by its acronym, OSTAR). Ten additional competitors joined the original group. One of the newcomers, the Frenchman Eric Tabarly, trounced the fleet and took the honours in 27 days, 3 hours, 56 minutes. Chichester came second, 20 hours and 1 minute later. He beat his personal target time handily, but second was a new place for him, an ignominious position for a lone adventurer.

Tabarly was awarded the Legion of Honour and became a national hero in France: 'Thanks to him it is the French flag that triumphs in the longest and most spectacular race on that ocean which the Anglo-Saxons consider as their special domain,' proclaimed the *Paris Jour.*

Single-handed racing hit the big time. National pride on both sides of the English Channel, from two nations famous for their sense of superiority, xenophobia, and rivalry, now focused on the third OSTAR, due to be held in 1968. At least forty sailors announced plans to compete. Many had new, experimental craft designed and built solely for the purpose of winning that one race. Eric Tabarly was building a new 67-foot trimaran, capable of tremendous speeds; at the time this was a radical reappraisal of the size of boat one person could handle. These boats, with their size and gear and engineering, became so expensive that they were beyond the reach of ordinary sailors. Yacht racing began to resemble motor racing, and the long, increasingly ugly hulls were plastered with commercial logos.

A few sailors felt this was veering too far from the notion of 'sport'. They wrote disapproving letters to yachting magazines, dropped away, and left the field to younger sailors who were learning to navigate the tide rips and currents of commercial sponsorship.