

By Chuck Gould

From the **Book Locker**



Restless Soul Seeks the Spirit of the Sea

Grundmann, Erika. *Dark Sun: Te Rapunga and the Quest of George Dibbern*. Auckland, NZ: David Ling Publishing, Ltd., 2004. ISBN 0-908990-93-6.

Nearly everybody wants to be George Dibbern. If not all day, everyday, then certainly during moments when we fantasize about throwing off our yokes of obligation and responsibilities to go adventuring at sea.

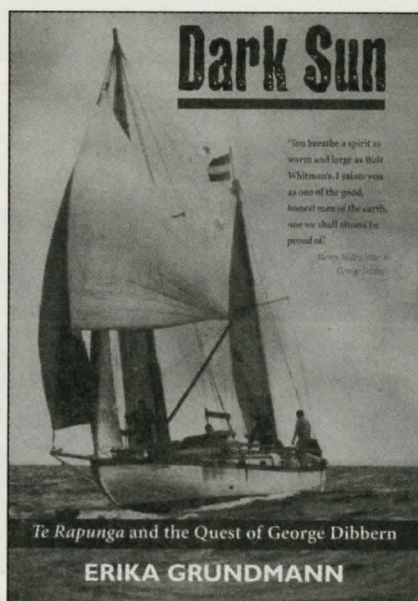
Erika Grundmann has written a very readable account of George Dibbern's fascinating life. Readers might wonder about the controversial motivations leading to Dibbern's decision to abandon his wife and daughters in Germany and follow his own star across the planet, and Grundmann's well-researched and insightful text provides some clues essential to unraveling the mystery of this "man without a country."

Readers will follow Dibbern's eventful life of 73 years, beginning with his birth to German parents in 1889. As a teenaged apprentice seaman he jumped ship in Australia and drifted through a series of short-term jobs and failed business ventures in Australia and New Zealand. His German nationality resulted in his internment as an "enemy alien" on Somes Island in Wellington Harbour (NZ) during the final months of World War I. Following the armistice, Dibbern was repatriated to Germany where he met and married Elisabeth Vollbrandt. George and Elisabeth had three daughters.

The most remarkable portion of Dibbern's life began when he set sail for the South Pacific in his 32-foot ketch, *Te Rapunga*, in 1930. As Hitler's Nazi party ascended to ever-greater prominence, Dibbern refused to fly the swastika and

crafted his own flag, as well as a passport that declared him a world citizen.

Dibbern's meanderings throughout the Pacific for the following 32 years were the journey of a restless and unsettled soul, and a fascinating account of the travels of a bohemian vagabond. Grundmann cites a plethora of newspaper clippings, magazine articles, and sources (including an extended correspondence with American author Henry Miller) to document the



physical and suggest the spiritual odyssey of George Dibbern. People, places, and romantic relationships are continuously discarded throughout the remainder of Dibbern's amazing life.

A CBC reporter's interview with George Dibbern, as recorded in *Dark Sun*, may offer some insight into his philosophy.

"Why, sir, did you make the trip from Germany to Vancouver in such a small boat?"

"To find the spirit of the sea."

"Would you explain that, Captain Dibbern?"

"Well, the Bible says that the spirit of God moves on the face of the water. And I wanted to find that spirit. And, as you can never find anything by chasing it...but only by waiting and humbly preparing yourself for it...I took a small boat and no motor...small because of he humbleness...without a motor...because of the waiting. I wanted to find that spirit because of the condition the world is in."

West Coast readers will particularly enjoy the chapters pertaining to Dibbern's adventures off the coast of British Columbia. In the late 1930s, Dibbern's ketch was often seen in close company with M. Wylie Blanchet's vessel *Caprice* (M. Wylie Blanchet wrote the iconic regional cruising book *The Curve of Time*).

At 510 pages (including 100 photos), *Dark Sun* initially appears slightly intimidating (and there are portions where the book suffers from an overdose of minutia), but Grundmann's pleasant style is very fluid and easily read. Her writing features a consistently skillful structure and tone, rather than needlessly complex paragraphs where every phrase must be parsed and dissected to be fully appreciated.

George Dibbern may or may not have realized his quest to discover the spirit of the sea, but Erika Grundmann seems to have done a credible job of reflecting the elusive spirit of a restless adventurer.

The book is published in New Zealand, and Grundmann is currently seeking a distributor for North America. *Dark Sun* is available for purchase directly from Erika Grundmann, who can be reached through her e-mail address grundman@island.net. ■